Thomas Nesbit

Deep Fried

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Smashwords Edition

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This book is dedicated to Michael Ian Borer

DEEP FRIED is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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CHAPTER 1

Eddy Funderburke wanted to fuck his mom. And this wasn't some flippy-dippy hunger like a craving for Twizzlers. We mean serious. Despite negotiations with his id *and* Jesus of Nazareth, neither would take away the obsession.

Yes, he knew it was wrong to lust after the 40DDs that once provided breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And even the threat of Hell couldn't shake his desire to lick the pink apartment he once squatted for nine blissful months.

It didn't help that Josie Funderburke was hot, at least by Roughedge County standards. She freely admitted that God had made her "big boned," prompting the church ladies to fawn over how well she wore it, draping her flesh in yards of angora, crushed velvet, and lace. And when she strutted by

with black kitten heels, all the men of Bunkum Creek Church couldn't help but tap their feet.

Eddy wanted Josie all the time, and his brother's graduation day proved no different. Sweating beneath the punishing sun, Eddy stared at his mother's thighs cooking on the bleachers. He wanted to rub his cheeks against her pantyhose, burying his nose deep into her crotch. A fourteen-year-old virgin, he didn't know how pussy smelled, but he figured – in the immortal words of God the Father – it was good.

"There he is!" said Josie, making Eddy look up from his mother's nylons.

He watched his brother stomp across the plywood platform, snatching a scroll from an elderly woman who looked five minutes away from heat stroke.

"Gabe Funderburke," said the principal of Robert F. Williams High, shouting into a bendy microphone.

Eddy smiled as the Funderburke name boomed across the football field, prompting a few claps and hollers.

After tossing the scroll to the crowd, Gabe ripped off his robe and curled his biceps at a photographer. Some teachers tried to wave him off stage, his greasy skin shining in the sun.

"That son of mine," said Josie, shaking her head. "Wicked to the core."

"At least he's got on somethin underneath."

A couple of security officers tried to manhandle Gabe, but the baby oil wouldn't let them get a good grip. After jerking away, he walked off the stage alone. The crowd roared as he slung his graduation cap into the stands.

"I'm afraid for his soul," said Josie. "He ain't nothin but an idolater."

“He don’t worship Satan.”

“He worships his body and that car of his. He needs to realize there ain’t nothin eternal about no Camaro.”

“God’ll take care of him,” said Eddy. “Don’t you worry.”

“I want you to promise me somethin,” said Josie, plunging her airbrushed nails into Eddy’s arm. “Don’t you ever turn out like Gabe. God made my baby special."

“I ain’t no baby.”

“You are and always will be,” she said, planting a fiery kiss that made Eddy’s blood churn. “I love you more than you’ll ever know.”

After the ceremony, Eddy ducked into the backseat of the Camaro, as Josie promised to take the family to A1 Super Chinese Buffet, the cheapest deal around on all-you-can-eat crab legs. The car screeched out of the parking lot, sending Eddy sliding across pleather seats greased with Armor All. His head smacked against the speaker panel.

“Don’t fuck up my 6x9s,” said Gabe, jerking around.

Eddy could barely hear him over a mashup of “Brown Sugar” and “Mr. Carter.”

“Watch your mouth,” said Josie.

“It’s graduation, I can do whatever the hell I want.”

“So long as you live in *my* house you’re still *my* child.”

Gabe punched the accelerator and passed a Kubota combine that nearly took up both lanes. After they cleared a hill – gaining a bit of air – Eddy peeked out the window, watching the sun draw neon hues out of the pines and pastures, lending them a radioactive sheen. It would be another half-hour before they made it to Fecalton, the nearest town.

When they walked into the Chinese restaurant, Eddy figured his mother would request a table close to the kitchen. After all, he knew the routine. They would remain seated until a Latino hauled out a steaming pan of crab legs, then they'd pounce the hot bar, sticking out elbows to keep the senior citizens at bay. Eddy always hated the waiting part, preferring to blow his appetite on hushpuppies and fish sticks. After enough whining, Josie would sometimes let him off the leash, but this was Gabe's graduation day – the Funderburkes had to fuck the system.

As they snapped apart the crustaceans, sending crab juice in every direction, Eddy was happy to be sitting next to Gabe, whose muscles always attracted stares from shy girls and nervous men. If nothing else, it made it easier for Eddy to ignore his own "baby fat," as his mother still called it. Short and husky, he was better suited for girls' jeans from the Juniors department, which Josie would often slip him under the dressing room door, telling Eddy – and everyone else in the vicinity – that he should be proud of his bubble butt.

"Figured y'all should know," said Gabe, drenching some crabmeat in melted butter. "I'm movin out tomorrow."

"No way," said Eddy, looking up from his plate.

"You can't just up and leave," said Josie. "What about your job with Orville?"

"He don't mind. Wanted a Mexican anyway."

"Where you heading?" said Eddy.

"Myrtle Beach," said Gabe, snapping a crab claw. "Ain't gonna spend my life shoveling turkey shit."

"You got no place to live," said Josie.

"Gettin a place with Travis and Justin. We got enough saved up."

“Ain’t no way you’ll make it down there. It’s too expensive.”

“I’ll get a job at The Stud Factory,” said Gabe with a grin. “You know I ain’t afraid to strut it.”

“Can I come and visit?” said Eddy, sucking down a spoonful of banana pudding.

“Have to do something with that haircut,” said Gabe, rubbing his wet fingers through Eddy’s hair, snapping the gelled stalactites stuck to his forehead. “Girls don’t need to think I’m with some fag.”

“Screw you.”

“Now don’t go pushin my baby around,” said Josie.

“Sorry, Mozart.”

“Shut up!” barked Eddy.

“Might be best if you moved your fancy butt to Myrtle Beach tonight.”

“Can’t do it. Gotta get in a couple more rounds with Emily.”

“You better leave as soon as we get home. I’ll even help you pack.”

“Whatever,” said Gabe.

“Excuse me,” said Josie, waving over one of the busboys. “Can you get them to bring us the check?”

“But I ain’t had no soft serve,” said Eddy.

“Don’t get whiney, little man. We got some Napoleon at home, remember?”

When they went to pay the bill, the owner smiled at them, straining as if the sun were in his eyes. Looking at a faded poster of Delphi hanging behind the cash register, Eddy wondered why the proprietor left Greece to open a Chinese restaurant in Fecalton, North Carolina. He grabbed a couple

of cherry lollipops and walked out into the humidity, his stomach rumbling from pudding and seafood.

Rocking out to the latest *Gangsta Grillz*, Gabe smeared the streets on the way home, cutting an hour-long trip in half. Gunning it past Orville's turkeyhouses, he turned onto a gravel road that led them deep into the woods. Eddy loathed how slowly his brother took Funderburke Way, careful not to nick the fenders with kicked-up rocks.

But even more than that, Eddy hated seeing the Funderburke grounds creep into view, especially the clearing around the doublewide, where weeds grew waist high. Even though he considered himself a professional yard artisan – having mowed Bunkum Creek Church three summers straight – there was no way he could tackle his own grass, as rusted engines and appliances lurked within the wilds, ready to rip apart the mower deck. Some time ago, feral dogs tore out the insulation underneath the house trailer, leaving pink fibers waving among the cinderblocks. Looking at a heap of trash piled against the woods, he hoped that such images would serve as a dramatic backdrop for a future PBS special on Eddy Funderburke – the world's greatest classical violinist.

Gabe pulled up to the backdoor, letting the car idle.

"Y'all get out," he said. "Got business to take care of."

"Don't be surprised if your crap's out in the yard when you get back," said Josie, as Eddy swooped out of the backseat.

"Make it easier to pack," said Gabe, hitting the accelerator so hard that the passenger door swung shut.

Inside the house, Eddy grabbed a fresh bucket of Neapolitan ice cream and opened the silverware drawer, looking for a soupspoon.

"Ants all up in here again," shouted Eddy.

"Use the Raid!"

Eddy grabbed the industrial-sized black can, choked with a yellow collar – *25% Free*. He nearly emptied the canister, watching the ants twitch to death. By the time he had carried out Josie's orders, the air was so thick with insecticide that he could barely breath. Figuring that the silverware was toxic, he grabbed a wooden spoon off the range.

Back in his bedroom, Eddy squatted down on the bottom bunk and began shoveling mouthfuls of chocolate down his throat. He tried to avoid the strawberry and vanilla, but once he gobbled up all the chocolate, he let the wooden spoon cross into pink territory. His mind sifted through impressions of the day as he wondered what he'd write about in his journal, a depository for his wild fantasies and cloudy memories, all mashed into new visions.

Crunching a frozen strawberry that sent a jagged pain through his jaw, he realized – for the first time – that he would soon be living alone with Josie Funderburke. Not only that, but Gabe wouldn't be poking around his journal, reading passages aloud in Shakespearean Southern while Eddy tried to snatch the spiral-bound notebook, scratching himself on the wire. With big brother out of the way, he could write whatever he desired.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, Eddy devoured microwave pancakes drenched in syrup while watching TV. He always loved the sweet taste after Josie forced him to chug an entire bottle of Sudafed, an everyday ritual.

"I can't believe they still show this stuff," said Eddy, referring to a rerun of the Teletubbies.

"I just love them little boogers," said Josie, doubling over with laughter as a baby's head appeared in the sun.

"Purple one's queer," said Eddy, checking out his mom's cleavage as he took a big gulp of Mountain Dew.

"Ain't no way."

"That's what they said in Sunday School. Got that big ol' purple triangle on his head. Purse, too."

“Well I’ll be,” said Josie, looking back at the TV.

“Told ya.”

“We shouldn’t be watching this,” said Josie, grabbing the remote.

As his mother flipped through the channels, Eddy heard the roar of his brother’s Camaro. He went to the window and saw a massive trailer hitched to the car.

“He got a U-Haul,” he said. “Ain’t joking around.”

Eddy watched as his brother opened up the trailer, slinging out plastic crates that he’d seen around Orville’s turkey farm. When he held the backdoor to let his brother in, Eddy noticed that each one was labeled “Chlortetracycline Hydrochloride.”

“Don’t be bringing that nastiness into my house,” said Josie.

“I washed them out.”

“You gonna stink up the place with them things. I know where Orville keeps 'em.”

“These clean,” shouted Gabe, already hauling the crates into the bedroom.

Eddy decided to join him back there, figuring he could finish off his second helping of pancakes after his brother hit the road. In the bedroom, the red boxes formed a fiery pillar that nearly touched the ceiling. When Gabe opened the first one, Eddy saw dust whoosh into the air. It wasn’t long until the entire bedroom smelled like worn-out kitty litter.

“Gonna make my shit reek,” said Gabe, slamming down one of the crates in front of the closet.

He rolled up an armful of clothing – hangers and all – and stuffed it into the box. After cleaning out the closet, he tackled the bookshelf, clearing away the amino acids, protein

powders, and vitamin supplements that had tempted Eddy for years, even though Gabe said they'd only make him fatter. Besides *The Picture Bible*, the only things left on the bookshelf were cassette tapes of Eddy playing the violin, the remnants of his obsessive practicing rituals.

"You can keep all the posters," said Gabe, referring to the bikini models that covered almost every inch of the walls, except for a corner where Eddy proudly displayed some plaques from violin competitions.

"You sure?"

"Got the real thing where I'm going," said Gabe, as he unwired the television.

"You can't take that!" said Eddy. "I need it!"

"It's *my* TV."

"Mom gave it to both of us, remember?"

"Fetch the chainsaw, Mozart. We'll get this straightened out."

"What's going on in here?" shouted Josie, stomping towards the bedroom.

"Gabe won't let me have the TV."

"It's Gabe's TV."

"See!"

"But you gave it to both of us!"

"Just cool it, little man," said Josie, appearing in the doorway.

"How am I going to watch *Family Guy*?"

"In the living room," said Gabe, carrying the TV out.

"Don't worry," whispered Josie once Gabe was out of range. "We'll get you a new TV."

"Yay!"

“But don’t tell him,” hissed Josie, patting him on the head. “Be a good boy.”

Once Gabe got everything packed up and announced he was about to pull out, Josie tossed down a couple of pills and took a Salem out of her cigarette case.

“Remember that Jesus loves you,” said Josie, blowing smoke out of both nostrils.

“Give him my best when he comes back.”

“Don’t you mock the Rapture,” huffed Josie. “You ain’t gonna be such a smart butt when you see the moon turn to blood and them four horsemen.”

“I know mom,” said Gabe, hugging his mother. “I’ll be fine.”

“Just don’t forget about us,” said Josie.

“We love you,” said Eddy, surprised by the words.

“Take care of mom, Mozart.”

Eddy stood beside his mother as Gabe pulled the out, knocking over the mailbox with the tail end of the trailer. Although he could see tears in his mother’s bloodshot eyes, he wondered why she never told Gabe that she loved him. *Maybe I spoke for the two of us*, Eddy thought, following her back into the house. *Or maybe she really just loves me.*

June 16

Me and mom in the bathroom again. Don't know where Gabe at, but she told me to get up on her. Put a bathcloth over it so I couldn't see. She's telling me to suck em. Probably misses it. I got all excited and that warm come out of me looking like Sudafed. Ran all the way down her belly.

Figured she'd beat me but she put it in her mouth. Said it gonna get better. Back then it still hurt cause of all that cotton that'd get stuck in the wound. She'd pick it with her fingernails and grease it up with Neosperm after we'd get out. Then she'd tell Gabe to get ahold of my arms and she'd sit on my legs so I can't move. Felt like she tore the skin clean off.

I still don't like takin showers cause the shampoo gets in my eyes.

CHAPTER 3

With Gabe away, the trailer seemed to take on a brighter hue. Josie even called in sick for once, telling Eddy that she'd take him to Wal-Mart to pick out a new TV. He was surprised when she nodded her head at the 24" Philips flatscreen, larger than any box the Funderburkes had ever owned. She put it on her Precious Moments MasterCard, smiling as she reminded her son that there's one less mouth to feed.

"I gotta get back into that *Tetris*," said Eddy, whipping out his Nintendo DS Phat. "Don't want my hand-eye coordination gettin loose."

"Whatever it takes, my little baby."

"I ain't no baby," said Eddy, pushing the Wal-Mart buggy towards the Grand Cherokee, eager to get home.

Even the hour-long drive to violin lessons began to take on a festive mood. To Eddy, it sometimes felt like they were on a date together, even though he'd never officially been on one. Right before they crossed into Charlotte city limits, Josie would pull over at Wendy's, regardless if the duo had eaten lunch just two hours ago.

"Want a Frosty?" said Josie, idling the SUV a few feet away from the intercom.

"Biggest they got."

Both Josie and Eddy squeezed the chilly cups between their thighs. Instead of chitchatting as they pulled away from the drive thru, they traded off slurps of chocolate shake, all to the beat of Bach's *St. John Passion*. It wasn't too long before Josie spoke up.

"Gabe and all got me thinkin. Don't know if I can stand being lonely the rest of my life."

"I'll be around."

"You know just as good as me that you'll head out the minute you graduate. Boy with your talent can't make it in Roughedge County."

"I'm gonna take care of you," said Eddy, imagining crawling into a canopy bed with his mother. "I'll even fly you to wherever I'm playing."

"You don't know what it's like, boy. I done turned 32 and ain't got much to show for it, except a kid that's done right and one that's going down the path of sin."

After sucking in air, Eddy opened the milkshake lid and slid out the straw, scrapping away any trace of Frosty.

"I think I'm about over your daddy."

"Whatchu talking about?"

“Figure it’s high time to find me a good clean-cut husband. I’ll be stuck alone in the house before you know it.”

“Ain’t no reason to get married,” said Eddy, biting down on the straw.

“Men don’t wanna buy some dried up cow if there’s a young heifer out there. You gotta understand, son.”

Eddy tried to figure out what to say. He wanted to comfort her by listing all the times that strange men had looked her up and down, as if their eyes tried to caress every curve. But he sure as hell didn’t want to encourage his mother to seek love outside of the family.

“I think your body’s pumpin,” said Eddy, readjusting the erection in his pants.

“Whatchu say?”

“I think you look good. That’s all.”

“Might be good to have a Christian man around the house,” said Josie, resuming her soulful drone, as if nothing had happened. “All you ever known is Gabe.”

“How about Preacher Manus?”

“He’s been married since before you could breathe, boy!”

“That ain’t what I’m sayin!” said Eddy, feeling like things were sliding further out of control. “He’s just been good for me. I don’t need nobody else.”

Eddy hoped his mother’s latest concern would soon pass, maybe after she got used to Gabe’s absence. No matter what, Eddy didn’t want a step dad who would make him practice deep in the woods while everyone else watched back-to-back episodes of *King of the Hill*.

After they arrived at his teacher’s apartment complex, Eddy felt overtaken with jealousy. His arms tightened, his teeth clamped shut. He couldn’t take the thought of someone

else touching her, exploring surfaces he'd only glimpsed through cracked doors and foggy mirrors. He tried to clear his thoughts as they knocked on Donald's door.

"Eddy and Josie!" said his violin teacher, armpits exposed for hugs.

As usual, Eddy was the first victim, twisting away once the grip tightened. Looking on while Donald gave Josie a full-frontal caress, Eddy thought he could hear her bra crinkle.

"Please, please," said Donald, directing Josie to the waiting room after she handed off an orange plastic bottle. "Commence with the *Partita*!"

Eddy always felt at home in Donald's apartment, even though he knew his mother paid for violin lessons with prescription pills that she stole from her nurse's assistant job at Southern Pride Rest Home. Leveling the violin onto his shoulder, he released the opening strains of the *allemanda*, keeping close watch on the sheet music, even though his fingers had memorized every note.

"Careful with the *rubato*! Bach would barf!"

Eddy began to hold tension in his left wrist, his normal response to Donald's outbursts. The dull pain made him feel like he had more control, allowing his internal rhythm to take over. No matter what, he hoped Donald wouldn't turn on the metronome, which always made him feel like a child.

"The beauty lies within the patterns," said Donald, readjusting his burly body against the leather armchair. "Let the music unfold like a kaleidoscope. Imagine the majestic cathedrals of Europe!"

Eddy wouldn't dare look at Donald while navigating the *corrente*. Watching his teacher only made him play faster,

sacrificing accuracy. He fixed his gaze on the sheet, hoping to make it flawlessly to the *sarabanda*.

"Chartres! La Sainte-Chapelle! Mon Dieu!"

Eddy used the *sarabanda* to rest his arms, but his focus never wandered, performing each phrase with grace.

"Here's where your heart should bleed a little," said Donald. "But don't take me into Debussy-ville."

Eddy could often ignore his teacher. But this time Donald's words conjured images of floury faces and corsets pulled tight, anonymous beauties culled from *Amadeus*, a film Eddy watched obsessively. He pivoted to point his pelvis towards the sliding-glass door, knowing that the birds outside wouldn't be interested in his budding erection.

"Don't lose it!" said Donald, as Eddy ventured towards the *giga*. "This is supposed to be a real dance. Don't make me see a bunch of fairies waltzing around!"

Looking blindly at the blank spaces in his sheet music, Eddy tried to imagine Mozart's maidens dancing at his command. But soon he lost the dream.

"Play like your life is on the line!"

"I ain't even made it to the *ciaccona*."

"And you might as well not even try if you don't put a little more oomph into the *giga*. Play with balls!"

Eddy began to overemphasize the first beat of every measure, hoping the pounding would shut up Donald.

"Now you got it! Take it all the way and nail that bastard!"

Eddy sped through the final passages, praying that Donald would let him slide into the *ciaccona*. For over a month, he had spent the last half of the lesson taking the section slowly, playing it measure-by-measure against the steady thump of

the metronome. He had never integrated it into the entire *Partita*.

"Commence with the *ciaccona*!"

Eddy launched into the last section, over ten minutes of impossible passages. He tried to block out Donald's mandate, which cycled throughout Eddy's head, even when his teacher hummed in approval – *Don't fuck it up!*

Halfway into the last section, Eddy's anger began to brew. He thought about all the times that Donald would shake the dust off his violin to show Eddy how it should be played. His attempts were usually nothing more than pronounced slurs, always ending with him screaming, "You know what I mean!"

I can outplay the bald bastard, thought Eddy, trying to rein in the tempo.

"You've got it! Can you hear it, Josie?"

"You better believe it."

When Eddy arrived at the end of the piece, he was rewarded with applause from Donald and his mother. The young violinist stood there, his arms and fingers throbbing. He knew that Donald would soon tear the piece apart and make him repeat passages measure by measure. But for now Eddy stood triumphant, content that his teacher never once made him cease the *ciaccona*.

CHAPTER 4

With school out, Eddy no longer had to wait until the weekend to mow Bunkum Creek Church. Over the past two summers, he had become a master of yard cultivation, bringing order to acres of crabgrass, milkweed, and the occasional patch of fescue. Just like his brother, he mowed shirtless, determined never to get a farmer's tan. Sometimes he even shored up his belly, making sure the sun had access to the milky skin beneath. But he would usually forget about it when he turned a corner, leaving him with a white ring above his waistline all summer long.

He also refused to wear sunscreen, as Gabe taught him that sunburn was a crucial step to deep tanning.

"That shit is for pussies," his brother would whisper as he pushed the 30 SPF aside for more baby oil.

But after mowing, Eddy always came away with what Josie would repeatedly call a third-degree burn, damage so fierce that even a t-shirt was too rough for his raw shoulders. Despite his mother's resolve, he always turned away the aloe, wanting to prove that he was just as much of a man as Gabe Funderburke.

When it came time to mow on Wednesday morning, Eddy set out for the Bunkum Creek Church graveyard, starting – as usual – around the most primitive tombstones facing the road. Some of the granite ones predated the Civil War. Others were just sharp splinters of shale weathered beyond recognition.

Such sights made Eddy a bit edgy, even though this was his third summer behind the blades. He wondered how many of the dead had actually made it to Heaven. Sometimes he couldn't shake the thought that the condition of the tombstones reflected the state of Bunkum Creek's souls. He tried to fathom what his stone would look like, imagining that it contained deep veins that would crack and expand as the seasons cycled.

After all, Eddy figured he was heading to Hell. Kids at school had taught him that Jesus didn't like chronic masturbators. Even though he couldn't find any prohibitions against jerking off in the *King James Bible*, Eddy knew he was on the wrong side of the law. And his obsession with Josie's curves – of course – didn't help his case for eternal bliss.

After finishing the cemetery and church grounds, he drove the lawn mower back to the parsonage. Although the sun was on its way down, he could make out a shadowy figure on the

back porch with a red dot whirling around its head. Eddy figured it was Preacher Manus, but he found it difficult to believe that a man of God would suck smoke, especially since Josie made it all-too-clear that tobacco – like almost anything that produces a sensation – leads straight to the Fiery Furnace.

"God keeps me addicted so you'll be scared straight," Josie always said, defending her two-packs-a-day addiction to Salem menthols. "It's my cross to bear."

But spotting Preacher Manus huffing tobacco was a different matter. By the time Eddy locked up the shed, the large shadow had gotten rid of the cig and began walking in his direction. As the light on the power pole flickered above, the meaty man stuck out his hand, just as he did every Sunday after church.

"How you been, Eddy?"

"Alright, I reckon."

"You got a minute?"

"Momma's got dinner going."

"Well, this won't take long," said the preacher. "Come over here and sit a spell."

"Guess she won't care if I'm a little late," said Eddy, following the preacher up the wooden planks of the back porch.

Taking a seat around a plastic table, Eddy was careful not to lean back on the chair, as his back ached from sunburn.

"Now, I know it might not be my place to talk with you about this, but I figured I should, especially since there ain't no man around your house anymore," said the preacher, readjusting his girth in the chair. "Your momma ever talked to you about sexual reproduction?"

“Never,” said Eddy, wondering if God had somehow communicated his innermost fantasies to the preacher. “Why you ask?”

“You gonna be a sophomore next year. Figure it won’t be long until you meet some pretty little thang.”

“Really?”

“You ain’t done involved in no sexual activity yet, are you?”

Eddy didn’t know how to answer, but he figured he shouldn’t lie to God’s right-hand man. The problem was just figuring out how much truth to tell. The Sermon on the Mount taught him that even lusting after someone was committing adultery, so – to some degree – Eddy could be considered a motherfucker in the purest sense of the word. But he figured he could get off on a technicality since Jesus did not talk about cases of incest and – of course – neither he nor Josie had ever been married.

“You ain’t gonna tell nobody, are ya?”

“Lay your sins at the foot of the cross, my child.”

“I’ve, you know.”

“Just let the Spirit guide you.”

“I’ve touched myself,” said Eddy, pointing at his crotch. “With underwear.”

“What?”

“Women’s, you know.”

“You ain’t been trying it on now, right?”

“No sir!” said Eddy, thinking about all the times he wanted to plunge his legs into Josie’s nylons. “It just looks pretty.”

“You better watch yourself,” said the preacher. “The devil’s always out there trying to find ways to steal your soul.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about it,” said Eddy, feeling his cheeks fill with blood. “I know it’s gonna send me to Hell.”

“Jesus can wash away all sins,” said the preacher, crossing his legs. “Just don’t go puttin on your momma’s bloomers. That ain’t right.”

Eddy couldn’t fathom what the preacher would think if he saw him with Josie’s drawers between his teeth, blue eyes burning as he fucked a jar of Pond’s Cold Cream.

“Does it make Jesus mad?”

“Makes Him think you’re a little fruity.”

“I ain’t no queer,” said Eddy. “I only like women.”

“That’s what we like to hear.”

“Can I go now?”

“Just promise me that you won’t have sex until you’re married,” said the preacher. “A lot of kids already started down the wrong road, and I don’t want to see that happening to you.”

“What if somebody sexes me while I’m sleepin?”

“You can always become a born-again virgin, but God likes you to keep His promises. He sees everything, you know. Like Santa.”

“I’ll do right,” said Eddy, smiling at the preacher.

“That’s what I like to hear, my boy!”

“Now you say I ain’t going to Hell for touching myself?”

“Better to take care of business that way than winding up with AIDS.”

“Just don’t tell my mom, alright?”

“Don’t you worry, Eddy. It’s just between us mens.”

After saying goodbye to the preacher, Eddy road home on his BMX, eager to fondle his mother’s pantyhose. Even though he figured Jesus didn’t like his ways, Eddy felt that the Lord could forgive anything, even if things got a bit sticky with Josie.

“I can always be a born-again virgin,” he whispered, popping a wheelie at the crossroads.

June 23

I'd sit there and tell God to move the bow and I'd believe in him. I'd even get down on my knees and pray so loud that mom could hear. But nothin would move a bit. Not even the violin. I'd shoot birds at him, say his name in vain, even dared him to chop me up just so I'd know he was up there. Figured he'd let me know if he really cared.

Still do it sometimes when nobody's looking.

CHAPTER 5

During summer vacation, Eddy developed a ruthless routine that involved – immediately after breakfast – thirty minutes of *Tetris*, followed by a half hour on the violin, repeated *ad infinitum* until it was time for bed. Taking into consideration breaks for Swiss Cake Rolls and Star Crunch, he clocked in at least five hours of solid practice each day, recording every session with an old tape deck. The timer on his Taco Bell watch kept him in line, even when his appetite made him want to linger around the kitchen.

One day, Eddy was on his 49th level of *Tetris* when his mother knocked on the door.

"You know how important this is!" said Eddy, pausing the game. "I can't just stop whenever I feel like it."

"Cool it, mister. We got something to talk about."

"This better be good," said Eddy, crossing his arms.

"Preacher Manus called this morning."

Eddy gripped his Nintendo DS, bracing for anything. He searched his mother's face for clues, but even her eyes didn't tip him off. He tried to think of ways to explain. Only one word cycled in his brain, losing meaning with every repetition. Once spoken, he hoped it would cover everything.

"Sorry," said Eddy, feeling his muscles charge with adrenaline as he looked down at the paused *Tetris* screen.

"Whatchu sorry about?"

"Nothing. I didn't do nothin bad."

"Why'd you say that then?"

"I don't know," said Eddy, stretching his arms and popping his wrists. "What'd the preacher say?"

"Told me y'all had some sort of man-to-man talk the other night. I'm surprised you didn't say nothin about it."

"Figured you wouldn't be interested," said Eddy, shifting around in his chair.

He felt compelled to confess everything, to let out the images that had haunted his dreams for months. But Josie didn't seem mad. He thought she didn't know the whole story.

"Preacher's talkin about gettin together a youth group," said Josie. "Thought it'd be a lot of fun for the kids in the community."

"Who all's gonna be in it?"

"Just people from church."

"I don't want to hang out with a bunch of rednecks," said Eddy. "You told me yourself I was better than all them."

“They’re a lot better than them so-called friends of yours. Them bozos wouldn’t even speak to you if they caught you at TJ Maxx.”

Eddy remained silent, hoping she would let it go. Ever since Robert F. Williams Middle, he’d tried to associate with the popular crowd, even though they would shout “farm boy” if he stood too close.

“We ain’t like them doctors and lawyers that can buy whatever they want,” Josie continued.

“At least they don’t make their kids do Mexican work all summer.”

“Don’t go thinking you somebody you ain’t,” said Josie. “Take off that Tommy Hilfiger shirt and you’re still country.”

“You want me to start wearing a FFA jacket?”

“Preacher just wants you to be a part of the youth group. That ain’t so hard.”

“Might as well plow up the football field with the rest of them on Tractor Day.”

“Listen here, little man. This wouldn’t be such a big deal if Preacher Manus hadn’t told me about you wantin to get with girls.”

Eddy folded his arms again, feeling blood pumping through his neck. He wondered how much she knew.

“It ain’t true.”

“You sayin the preacher tellin stories?”

“No, ma’am.”

“He just wants you to be around good Christian girls, not them types Gabe used to bring around here.”

“Girls’ll pull me away from the violin,” said Eddy, turning his gaze away from Josie’s tits. “You said that yourself.”

“I know it, hunny. I don’t like the idea of you getting all googly-eyed around some hussy, even if she’s been baptized. You bound to get yourself in a lick of trouble.”

“Well I won’t join no youth group then.”

“Ain’t like that,” said Josie, letting out a sigh. “Preacher’ll be on me quick if a certain Eddy Funderburke don’t show up next Sunday night.”

“I got to?”

“I don’t like it either, but that’s the way God wants it.”

“I’ll go if you get me Papa John’s on the way back from violin lessons.”

“Every week?”

“Yep.”

“So long as you stay in the youth group, that’s a deal.”

CHAPTER 6

Eddy didn't want to blow away his Sunday night with the youth group, but he knew he had no choice. Approaching the cemetery hill, he stood up on his BMX to peddle hard, trying to get enough momentum to keep from walking his bike to the top. After reaching the crest, Bunkum Creek Church came into view, its bleached steeple belting out Muzak renditions of time-tested hymns, reminding everyone that Roughedge County was God's country.

He leaned his bike against the brick walls and walked towards what they called the Fellowship Hall. He tried to ignore the sweat that had soaked through his Beethoven t-shirt, figuring there would be no one there to impress. If nothing else, he took comfort in thinking that turkeyhouse

manure from the surrounding farms had burnt out everyone's sense of smell.

Even though Eddy was early, others had already arrived, sitting in folding chairs around collapsible tables. Among them was Tim Baucom, a thin kid outfitted in hick: Wal-Mart shorts and shoes, tin of Copenhagen on the table, and a t-shirt that boasted his loyalty to the Helms Road Volunteer Fire Department. Beside him were Aaron and Kyle Plyler, identical twins who would be entering Robert F. Williams High next fall. They jabbered about the Braves recent sweep against the Phillies, but no one else seemed to care.

"Only thing matters is #88 won today," said Michael Barefoot, one of the heavies in the bunch. Nearly everyone affirmed Michael's take, including Big John Fulton who everyone simply called "Chief."

"This is Junior's year," said Chief, resting his meaty arms against his belly.

"Tony Stewart gonna take them all down," said Jenny Henderson.

Nearly everyone in the room groaned, even Preacher Manus. When it came to NASCAR in Roughedge County, even Eddy knew that no one should cheer on a driver born outside of the Carolinas.

"Ain't nobody better than #24," said Shelley Benton, a 30-something housewife who stood beside the preacher. "Jeff's still the cutest of them all."

As nearly everyone booed her, Eddy looked over at his classmate Will Spurlock – the fattest kid of the bunch. Like Eddy, he never joined in the conversation, looking as if he were lost on some distant plateau. Even though they were once close friends, Eddy hadn't spoken to Will since

elementary school. Back then, Josie forbid them from hanging out together after discovering the eight-year-old boys flipping through dusty *Penthouse* magazines. It wasn't long before violin filled the void.

Despite the chatter, Eddy heard the door open at the back of the Fellowship Hall. First came Dylan Spurlock – Will's younger brother – followed by Amber Abernathy, one of Robert F. Williams Middle's most decorated cheerleaders. Everyone acted excited to see Dylan, but only Eddy seemed thrilled to watch Amber saunter to the table. After all, the Abernathys were the wealthiest in the community, clinging to Bunkum Creek Church only out of family ties, if the rumors were true. But none of this mattered to Eddy. Underneath Amber's t-shirt sprouted a couple of titties no bigger than plums, but more than enough to make Eddy have to readjust his shorts. Without a doubt, she was the only good catch available at Bunkum Creek Church, even though the unspoken consensus was that she was off-limits.

Must be a sign from God, thought Eddy as he crossed his legs, trying to bury his boner. Reason suggested that he would never have a chance with the 12 year-old legend, but Eddy was open to letting the universe work its magic, especially if it brought such a sweet-smelling lady into his life.

After getting everyone's attention, Preacher Manus began addressing the group.

"We got big plans cause God's got big plans," said Preacher Manus. "I'm challenging y'all to raise enough money to take a trip to the Great Smoky Mountains, so we can see some of God's most glorious handiwork firsthand."

Tim Baucom let out a rebel yell that was echoed by others in the group.

“Now it ain’t gonna be easy,” said Preacher Manus. “We’ve gotta show this community that we’re willing to work hard. But once they see what the good Christian youth are doing right here at Bunkum Creek, they’ll open up their hearts and shower us with blessings.”

“But how we gonna get the money?” said Kyle Plyler.

“Bake sales, car washes, whatever God tells us,” said Preacher Manus. “Me and Shelley here are gonna help, but each of you’ll have to dig deep into your souls and talk one-on-one with Jesus. There ain’t no shortcut to glory.”

“How bout if we don’t raise enough?” said Chief.

“God’s gonna take care of that. Never doubt the power of Jesus!”

“Amen!” shouted Will Spurlock with a fervor that raised eyebrows.

His younger brother Dylan tried to stifle a laugh, prompting Eddy to notice him for the first time in years. Back when Eddy and Will seemed inseparable, Dylan was little more than the skinny kid who always followed them around. But now, Will looked like the reject compared to Dylan, whose slack posture and cool demeanor gave everyone the finger.

After the preacher sent them off to bring in the cash, some of the boys stayed to play basketball. Unfortunately, the hoop was nothing but a rusted goal nailed to a power pole. A lot of shots landed in the woods, forcing the kids to jump through briars to find the ball.

“Can’t believe they making us beg like a bunch of Mexicans,” said Michael, mumbling the words so badly that Eddy could barely understand him.

“Don’t see why Jesus can’t just get us a backboard,” said Chief, attempting a shot from 3-point land.

“Who the fuck wants to go camping anyway?” said Dylan, grabbing the rebound.

“It’s gonna be cool,” said Tim. “My cousins been out there before.”

“If there ain’t no ass out there, I ain’t going,” said Dylan, nailing the shot.

“Will’s got enough ass to go around,” said Kyle.

“Fuck you,” said Will, running off to tackle the most vocal of the Plyler twins.

Watching Will lose traction on the gravel, Eddy remembered when the tubby kid used to chase him around the playground, an almost daily ritual until he accidentally pushed him down face first, leaving Eddy with a shiner for 3rd grade graduation. Then there was the time that Will crashed Eddy’s bicycle, smashing a battery-powered watergun mounted on the handlebars. One thing was certain – Will was a klutz.

“Gonna just stand there or shoot?” said Chief, hurling the ball at Eddy’s chest.

After recovering from the shock, Eddy tried to run a layup, only to have the ball smack against the goal. Some of the boys laughed as he walked over to his bike. He thought about riding home, hoping everyone would forget the blunder.

“Not leavin’ yet, are you?” shouted Will.

“Nah,” said Eddy, surprised to hear someone speak directly to him. “Just gonna ride around a bit.”

Each time Eddy circled the church, he looked over at Dylan, who had just finished his last year at Robert F.

Williams Middle School. For reasons Eddy couldn't fathom, Dylan seemed to have developed in opposition to his slightly older brother. For Will's lard, you had Dylan's definition. Instead of stumbling over himself, Dylan ruled the basketball court. Whereas Will screamed backwoods, Dylan belonged in an Abercrombie ad, his tanned arms resting on some bikini-clad beauty.

Hope he ain't tryin to get with Amber, thought Eddy as he stopped his bike in front of the boys. If Dylan was in the mix, he knew he didn't have a chance at scoring Bunkum Creek's only eligible babe.

After Eddy shouted goodbye to everyone, he booked it downhill before anyone could respond. As the sunset ripped apart the sky, leaving stains of orange and pink above the fields, Eddy hoped that he could somehow become as cool as Dylan one day.

CHAPTER 7

A few days after the youth group meeting, Eddy still couldn't stop thinking about Amber. Granted, he was glad to have a bit of relief from the incessant musings over his mom, even though he still tried to spy some skin whenever she got out of the shower. But more often than not, it was Amber who snuck into his cerebral cortex, especially whenever he took time for *Tetris*. As blocks cascaded down the screen of his Nintendo DS, his imagination tried to undress her. In his fantasy world, she always wore a sheer bra, revealing nipples no bigger than dimes. Her eraser tips nearly cut through the black mesh as she moaned Eddy's name again and again.

I've gotta take a break, thought Eddy as he hit the pause button. Unfortunately, his violin/*Tetris* schedule didn't allow

much time for snake handling, but he'd come to accept that it was just as necessary as taking a piss.

Right after he unpacked the Pond's Cold Cream, the phone rang.

"You gonna get that?" shouted Eddy, cracking his door.

"I've got it," said Josie, screaming over the TV.

Retreating back into his bedroom, Eddy decided to take advantage of his distracted mother. This wouldn't be some ordinary jerk-off session, where he'd rub his body against the life-sized stuffed unicorn in his closet. This time, he'd go all the way.

"Time to make love," he whispered into his full-length mirror.

He figured it'd be wise to say goodnight to Josie before dimming the lights, as she had a habit of tucking him into bed. Walking out into the hallway, he could see her on the loveseat, her bleached hair drooping over the telephone. Standing in the shadows to conceal his boner, he tried to get her attention by snapping his fingers. When she didn't respond, he beat on the walls until she looked over.

"What is it?" she mouthed, covering the receiver with her hand.

"Just wanted to say goodnight."

Josie waved and looked away. Not content, Eddy beat his chest like Tarzan, hoping that would be enough to distract her.

"Can you hold on a minute? My son's calling me."

When Josie looked over, Eddy could tell that she was upset, even though her voice sounded as sweet as iced tea.

"Can't you see I'm talkin?"

"You ain't gotta tuck me in tonight. I'm tired."

"Don't interrupt me when I'm on the phone."

"I'll see you in the morning, mom."

Eddy nearly skipped back to the bedroom, pleased that his plan had worked. After shutting the door, he bolted toward the closet. Ever since Gabe left, Eddy began hording some of Josie's lingerie, digging through her clothes whenever no one was around. Chief among his finds was a pair of nude pantyhose specked with dry skin. But tonight called for the black negligee, accented with lace. Because the fabric had a slight musky smell, he figured it was something his mother hadn't put on in years.

Gripping the garment, he turned off all the lights except for the tiny lamp on his nightstand. He took out the cold cream and Kleenex, arranging them on top of the chest-of-drawers for easy access. Undressed, he stroked his body in front of the mirror, as if his fingers could iron away his blubber.

After he put on the negligee, he refused to find his face in the mirror, afraid that it might break the spell. His erection bobbed towards the ceiling, creating a tiny tent that shook with every heartbeat.

I've got to go all the way, he thought as he rummaged for the pantyhose. He'd often rubbed them against his skin, but never gathered enough courage to try them on. Dipping his toes into the nylon worms, he no longer cared what Jesus thought, let alone Preacher Manus. After zigzagging the gauze to his knees, he jerked the pantyhose up to his waist, making his dick fold up like a wall bed.

He rubbed his hands across his thighs, listening to the nylon crackle against his calluses. Gazing into the mirror, he began to dream of a conjugal life with Amber, hoping that she

would always let him try on her clothes before they made love. He felt he would never want to live any other way.

Eddy rolled the nylon down past his balls, giving his meat a breather. He dipped his hand into the cold cream, letting it squish between his fingers. Before greasing up, he grabbed a wad of Kleenex and fell backwards onto the bed, careful not to let the white goop stain his Spongebob Squarepants comforter. With Gabe gone, there was no bunk above him obstructing his view of the bikini-clad models on the wall, watching his every move.

After turning off the lamp, Eddy began stroking himself, trying to imagine what Amber would feel like. He rubbed his chest with his dry hand, wishing she were there. Taking a handful of lace, he stuffed it into his mouth and clamped down with his teeth, savoring its chalky texture.

"Whatchu doing in bed so early?" said Josie, opening the bedroom door.

Eddy darted underneath the comforter, just before she turned on the light.

"You trying to hide something from me?"

"Ain't hiding nothin," said Eddy, the comforter wrapped tightly around his neck. "I just don't feel so hot."

"You sick or something?"

"Don't know," said Eddy, trembling beneath the sheets. "I'll be better in the morning."

"Whatchu got my Pond's out for, little man?"

"My chest felt all hot. Thought it might help."

"That don't make a lick of sense," said Josie, recapping the cold cream. "Let me get the thermometer."

"I don't need it," said Eddy, smearing his greasy hand against the sheets. "I'll be fine."

“You sure you ain’t hiding nothin?”

“No!” said Eddy, quickly realizing that he shouldn’t have shouted at her. “I’m clean.”

“You on fire!” said Josie, placing her hand against his forehead. “Better get up now so I can check you out.”

“I’m OK,” said Eddy, praying she wouldn’t jerk back the covers. “We can go to the doctor if I ain’t better in the morning.”

“You better get some rest then.”

“Sounds good, mom.”

After they said goodnight to one another, Josie smooched her son on the forehead. Alone in the dark, he thought back to what Preacher Manus said, wondering if his mother’s visit was nothing short of a warning from God. The garments that had flamed his desire minutes before now felt as nasty as leeches. After taking them off, he pushed them towards the end of the bed with his calloused feet.

“I ain’t gonna do that no more,” said Eddy, raising his hands in prayer. “Forgive me Lord.”

CHAPTER 8

After church on Sunday, Eddy stood at the bottom of the staircase, hoping to bump into Amber Abernathy. To ease his jitters, he counted the number of steps over and over, noting geometrical designs in the worn-out Astroturf. Sometimes everything seemed tied back to *Tetris*.

"Well if it ain't Eddy Funderburke," said Dylan, surprising him from behind.

"How's it goin?"

"Been better," said Dylan, kicking a rock into the grass.

"You gonna go to youth group tonight?"

"Nothin else happening."

"Heard that," said Eddy, trying to copy Dylan's slipshod delivery.

"Thinkin about heading over to Sunnyside later on. Wanna go?"

"Your family got a membership?"

"Nah, but we can get around that."

For a moment, Eddy didn't care if he came off too eager. After all, he'd never been inside Sunnyside Pool and Racquet Club, the closest thing to luxury in that stretch of Roughedge County. He knew it catered to the Charlotte types who took advantage of the cheap land, plopping down palm trees and McMansions on farms that went belly-up years ago. They were the kind of people Eddy hoped to become one day.

"How you gonna do it?" asked Eddy.

"There's ways," said Dylan, looking out towards the parking lot. "Holla at me later on and we'll meet up."

As Dylan walked away, Eddy asked for his number even though he didn't need it. He still had it memorized from all the times he used to call Will.

Once Dylan faded out of sight, Eddy looked around for Amber. However, it wasn't long before Josie came strutting down the steps, her black heels shining in the sun.

"Ready to hit the road?"

"I guess so," said Eddy, accepting that Amber must have ducked out of the back entrance.

That afternoon, Eddy got in three cycles of violin and *Tetris* before biking over to the Spurlocks. He knew the old farmhouse well, even though it'd been years since his last visit. In the meantime, Dylan's dad had put up some notorious vinyl siding, turning the entire house Richard Petty blue. Eddy often heard people gossiping about it, joking that the job won't be finished until somebody paints a big #43 on the side.

“Y’all be sure to gather there during the Second Coming,” Preacher Manus once joked from the pulpit. “Jesus would have to be blind to miss that house!”

When Eddy rode into the driveway, he saw Dylan shooting basketball out back. He wheeled his bike around at full speed, planning to leap off before it crashed into the post. At the last second, he turned away and locked the back wheel, slinging gravel as he slid into a nasty skid. A cloud of dust came up on cue.

“Whatchu gonna do next, jump a ramp?”

“Set it up,” said Eddy, thinking back to the old door Will used to prop up with cinderblocks. He wondered if it was still behind the shed.

“Ain’t no time to be fucking around,” said Dylan, shooting him a smile. “We got business to take care of.”

“Heard that.”

Dylan picked up his bike off the ground, a rusted ten-speed with a cracked foam seat.

“You need somethin like this if you really gonna ride.”

“That ol’ thang?”

“Outrun that little penis bike,” said Dylan, spitting at Eddy’s BMX as he sped past.

“Ain’t you got towels?”

“Quit your whining, buttnut. We need to get goin.”

Dylan and Eddy didn’t talk much on the ride to Sunnyside, except to exchange jabs. After being the punchline of the popular kids’ jokes too many times, Eddy hated to be picked on, even if he felt that Dylan didn’t mean it. He decided to play along, tossing back whatever trash Dylan threw his way. He figured he’d eventually get used to it, especially if he wanted to be as smooth as his idol.

“Pull over there,” said Dylan, pointing towards a gap in the tall hedges. Behind them was a chainlink fence draped in black gauze. Three strands of barbed wire ran across the top. In the distance, Eddy could hear people splashing and screaming.

“We gonna jump it?”

“Not here,” said Dylan. “Just hide your bike and follow me.”

Dylan and Eddy walked single file beside the fence until they came to a section where the barbed wire drooped over the side.

“All you got to do is make it over.”

“It’s electric?”

“You think I’d put my balls on an electric fence?”

“Bastards gonna be waitin for us when we drop,” said Eddy, imagining the police lined up with German Shepherds.

“See that big tree,” said Dylan, pointing above them. “That’s gonna hide us. Plus there ain’t nobody around this part.”

“Like shit there ain’t.”

“You hear anybody? Climb your ass up there.”

“You go first.”

“Fuck you then,” said Dylan, slamming his toes in the links. “But you better not run off, punk ass.”

Dylan cleared the fence in one swoop, shifting his weight like a gymnast. Eddy tried to copy his style as he climbed towards the top. Within range of the barbed wire, the fence started to sway, prompting him to grip the top.

“Don’t grab the wire,” said Dylan.

Eddy closed his eyes and climbed high enough to get across. It wasn't long before he could see the pool out in the distance.

"Just throw your leg over!"

After heaving his thighs over the fence, his trunks got caught on the wire.

"Jump!" shouted Dylan.

Eddy obeyed but his shorts got caught. They waved on the wire like a flag of futility.

"Get my shorts!" screamed Eddy, scrambling to cover his garbage.

"Ain't mine."

"Screw you," said Eddy, bolting up the fence to snatch the candy-apple trunks.

"Let's get on out of here," said Dylan, walking towards the pool. "Put your clothes on, too."

"They ain't got cameras, right?"

"Gonna put that shit on YouTube."

"Oh God," said Eddy. "You ain't been caught, right?"

"Stop whining. Ain't nothin gonna happen to us."

As they approached the pool, Eddy looked around for people that might know him. *Just a bunch of women and children here*, he thought, relieved that everyone was a stranger. Nearly all of the mothers wore one-piece suits and big sunglasses, reading magazines while stretched out on plastic lounge chairs. After taking off his shirt, Eddy checked out the crotches on display, trying to zero in on some cameltoe. It wasn't long before a 30-something got wise, prompting him to leap into the water.

When Eddy came back to the surface, he saw Dylan on the diving board, standing triumphant like a Greek statue.

After he stretched his arms – fingers locked together – Dylan sprinted off the platform, curling into a cannonball just a few inches away from Eddy. While Dylan was still underwater, Eddy thought about trying his luck on the high dive, but he didn't want to expose too much skin to the tanning beauties.

"Some hot ladies out here," whispered Eddy after Dylan came towards him.

"Wanna get some MILF action?"

"Maybe."

"Just start at home and work your way up."

"Screw you," said Eddy, splashing water at Dylan's face.

"I bet you ain't never got with a girl."

"Maybe I have."

"Don't feed me that shit," said Dylan, stretching out his arms against the pool's edge. "You look like the day you was born."

"Whatchu mean?"

"You need to get your dick wet. Still got that look on your face."

"Ain't like you ever been with somebody."

"Had my first blow job when I was eleven," said Dylan, cracking his knuckles. "Even fucked Kaitlin Snodgrass a couple of times."

Though Eddy figured that Dylan was lying, he didn't dare challenge him. He wanted to believe it was true, even if he'd never heard of the girl.

"Tell you what, Funderburke. Stick with me and I'll get you laid."

"How's that gonna happen?" said Eddy, swatting a horsefly away from his face.

"You got somethin that'll impress a girl."

“I can play the violin.”

“That ain’t gonna work,” said Dylan. “Girls’ll think you gay.”

“Momma said there ain’t nothin sexier than a man who can play an instrument.”

“If you’re interested in someone other than Josie Funderburke, you need to try harder.”

“Girls like that stuff,” said Eddy, crossing his arms in the water. “You play them something classical and it’s like straight outta Shakespeare.”

“Can’t you play a guitar or somethin?”

“Violin ain’t like the guitar. It takes talent.”

“At least try playing a song that’ll pick up girls,” said Dylan. “Work up something classy.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe some Elton John?”

“Screw that crap. Mozart had more women than Elton John.”

“This ain’t the Civil War, Eddy. You gotta get with the times.”

“I bet Amber likes classical music.”

Dylan slid back and put a hand up to his mouth, feigning surprise.

“Don’t tell me you interested in Little Miss Abernathy.”

“Maybe,” said Eddy, too nervous to say more.

“But she ain’t got no titties.”

“She’s got somethin popping out. You seen her last week?”

“There might be grass on that field after all,” said Dylan, giving the water a karate chop.

“She ain’t never been with anybody, right?”

“Don’t be giving me them misty eyes, Eddy Funderburke. You ain’t even hit it yet.”

“Just wondered if she ever had a boyfriend.”

“Wait ‘til school gets back,” said Dylan. “We gonna get you ass left and right.”

“But what about Amber?”

Dylan put his arm around Eddy’s shoulder and leaned into his ear.

“If I’m gonna get you laid, you got to accept one thing.”

Eddy looked straight into Dylan’s eyes, ready for the revelation.

“Don’t get mixed up with church pussy.”

July 2

Me and Amber in this cavern or something, smells like big rain. Lights was like Hell but the water wasn't hot. I had on trunks but she was naked. Just grabbed me and my face went straight into her hair so I'd stop staring. Then somethin crept out of her nipples all pink. Started wrapping around me like a octopus going through all my holes getting into everything.

Prayed we'd just turn into one meat but my brain was still trapped thinking about everything but couldn't move a fitch.

CHAPTER 9

No matter how hard he grinded away at the Bach *Partita*, Eddy knew that Dylan had a point. Classical music didn't reel in ass, especially in Roughedge County where most would mistake Mahler for a vicious canine. After a few days of deliberation, Eddy arrived at violin lessons ready to make a change.

"I need to learn somethin that's gonna pick up girls."

"What's this all about?" said Donald, stretching out on his leather sectional.

"Playing Bach all day ain't gonna help me find a soulmate," said Eddy, plopping down on the armchair.

"Since when does Eddy Funderburke care about girls?"

"Just started thinking I wouldn't be so lonely if I played the guitar."

"Doesn't take an ounce of talent to wield an ax, Eddy. You're a musician!"

"Can't I try some music that girls might know?"

"What happened to the Eddy who yearned to perform at Carnegie Hall?"

"You said I shouldn't get my hopes up with all them Chinese kids being born with a bow in their hand."

"Relax for a moment, Eddy. I want you to close your eyes and take a deep breath."

He humored his teacher but kept one eye open, watching Donald's breadbasket rise with each breath.

"I want you to envision your future," continued Donald. "Imagine what you truly desire."

Eddy thought back to the blonde lady he would never forget. She wore a blue sequin dress and a violin on her shoulder, introducing Bunkum Creek Elementary to what she called classical music. Ever since, he wanted to bring that same fire to the world, making souls twitter at the touch of a bow.

"I just want to be famous!"

"Not so soon, Eddy. You must concentrate. Look deep into your soul and all shall be revealed."

"Can't you just teach me some Elton John?"

"Tell me what you see!"

"What's going on in here?" said Josie.

When Eddy opened both his eyes, his mother looked ready to chop heads.

"I'm just trying to refocus your son's energy. It appears he's a bit out of alignment."

“Don’t be tryin any of that New Age manure on Eddy. That’s no better than worshiping the devil.”

“Please take a seat, Josie. I’m just trying to illuminate what lies behind your son’s desire for women.”

“I just want to learn some music that people care about,” said Eddy. “Thought it might help me make friends.”

“Don’t be lying like that, little man. I know what you’re trying to pull.”

“We could introduce some showtunes,” said Donald. “Maybe start off with a bit of Andrew Lloyd Webber.”

“What’s that?” said Eddy.

“*Phantom of the Opera, Cats, Jesus Christ Superstar*,” said his teacher. “He’s a powerhouse of emotion.”

“You promised you’d make him a clean-cut violinist, not some Liberace!”

“Guess it runs in the family,” said Donald.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Eddy.

“You mean she never told you about Kit Lorraine?”

“Out!” screamed Josie, pointing her son towards the door. “Get in the car.”

“But mom!”

“You best forget this ever happened,” said Josie, grabbing her son’s sheet music. “Let’s go!”

“It’s in his blood,” said Donald. “You can’t act like it isn’t there!”

Josie slammed the door, sending Donald’s shittzu into a frenzy. She marched to the Grand Cherokee and ordered Eddy into the passenger seat.

“Who was Donald talkin about?”

“Never you mind.”

“He wasn’t talkin bout daddy, was he?”

“Ain’t got a thang to do with him,” said Josie, digging out her pack of Salems.

“Well who’s Kit?”

“Ain’t no need for you to know.”

“I’ll get Donald to tell me.”

“Not if we don’t ever go back there,” said Josie, taking a long draw off her menthol. “Suit me just fine.”

“You can’t keep me away from the violin!”

“Remember who’s the boss around here, little man. Don’t be tellin me what to do.”

Josie sped down the streets of Charlotte, refusing to say another word. But Eddy couldn’t stop thinking of the name Kit Lorraine, hoping it belonged to the mystery man who brought him into this world. As she drove past Papa John’s Pizza – refusing to stop – Eddy offered up a silent prayer, hoping that all would soon be revealed.

CHAPTER 10

At youth group, Preacher Manus passed out boxes of chocolate bars, each one boasting Bunkum Creek Chocolate across the wrapper. No one seemed happy about selling them, especially since the going rate was twice the price of Hershey's. Nevertheless, Eddy rode home with a box of almond, hoping that Josie would unload them at Southern Pride Rest Home, where she'd worked as a nurse's assistant ever since he could remember.

"You'd sell a lot more if you came in there yourself," said Josie.

"But I don't want to be around them old fogies. They diseased."

"They're normal just like you and me. Half of them'll forget who you are the minute you walk out the door anyway."

Eddy eventually broke down and rode his bike over to Southern Pride, a box of chocolate strapped to his handlebars. As usual, the lady at the front desk let him wonder the halls, searching for his mother.

"Let me know if you need me to page her," she said.

Eddy rarely needed her help, as he knew his mother's haunts.

Peeping his head into open rooms, he loved the attention he got from the elderly, even if he hated to admit it. Some looked at him longingly, as if he were a lost family member who'd come back from the grave. Eddy loved to play the ghost, a mist of hope that would pass by silently, sometimes pretending to recognize the beholder.

He also liked to watch his mother playing with them, as everyone seemed to love her. To Eddy's surprise, she always had patience reserved for those in need. He realized that Josie's tenderness towards the elderly probably kept her on staff at Southern Pride, even if she never got the certificate she needed from Roughedge Community College.

Making his way down the corridor, he ran into Buster, a resident who had to be closing in on 100. He stood trembling in the hallway, holding onto his walker. Even though it seemed like he always had something to say, he'd just chomp air like a seagull.

"Welcome to the crack house," said Josie, after Eddy found her in the pharmacy.

She stuffed a couple prescription bottles into her grey sweatshirt.

"Why you always wear them clothes?"

"They're comfortable. Is that so wrong?"

Eddy shook his head and bit his tongue, disgusted that the Josie before him seldom matched the one he saw in dreams or wrote about in his journal. It didn't help that he was still upset about what had gone down at violin lessons last week, even though they hadn't talked about it since. He didn't know if she'd take him to Donald's this week, but he figured chances were slim.

After Eddy walked out of the pharmacy, Josie shut off the light and closed the door behind her.

"They don't make you do a retina scan to get in there?" said Eddy.

"Nah, just a key," she said, pointing up at the ceiling. "That security camera ain't worked in a month of Sundays."

After locking up the pharmacy, Josie took Eddy around to help him unload the chocolate. It didn't take long to empty the box with Josie as a sales rep. One woman – who'd obviously blown out her hearing aid – even bought a dozen bars, yelling that they were for her grandchildren. But to get the loot, Eddy had to reach into her shirt pocket, careful not to touch her the wrong way. Leaning over, he almost choked from the VapoRub slathered across her chest.

With fifty bars of Bunkum Creek Chocolate off his hands, Eddy asked to use one of the computers in the main office. Ever since school let out, he hadn't even been able to get on the Internet, as Josie wouldn't allow a computer into the trailer. He'd tried to get her to buy the *Nintendo DS Browser* – which would have been the third cartridge he owned after *Tetris* and *Mario Kart* – but she wouldn't have it. There weren't a lot of WiFi hotspots in Roughedge County anyway.

"I reckon you can mess around on it," said Josie, whose seniority around Southern Pride gave her some pull, at least after the office staff went home. "Just don't be lookin at anything that'll get me fired."

Out of habit, Eddy immediately signed into Facebook, thrilled to find that Leung Kin Fung had friended him, even though he hadn't answered his question about the Markees Stradivarius. He didn't waste much time, however, as there were more pressing matters – the identity of Kit Lorraine. Thanks to Google, it wasn't long before he got lucky.

Must've meant Kitty Lorraine, thought Eddy, gazing over the search results. According to Wikipedia, she was a bluegrass fiddler who faded out of the public eye after marrying a man named Bosephus McCoy. Eddy tried to find a picture of Kitty, but could only uncover an audio clip of her playing "Blue Grass Breakdown" with some other musicians on YouTube.

"What in the heck you doin in here?"

Eddy quickly minimized the screen before Josie could see. But when he turned around, he was surprised to find a smile on her face.

"Whatchu been lookin at, boy?"

"Something about a man named Bosephus McCoy."

"Where'd you learn that name?"

"Right here," said Eddy. "Even got Kitty Lorraine playin the fiddle."

Josie didn't stop him as he pulled up the webpage and clicked on the file.

"Well I'll be," said Josie, plopping down in a chair beside her son. "Only Kitty could wear out the 'Blue Grass Breakdown' like that. Used to be the hottest little firecracker

on the Dixie circuit, lighting up all them stages from here to Alabama."

"Did you know her?"

"She used to play the very same fiddle you own."

"You said you picked that up at a yard sale."

"Listen to me, little man. I knew Kitty Lorraine better than anyone."

"So who was she?" said Eddy, fidgeting in his chair.

It took a while for Josie to collect herself. After a few deep breaths, she told Eddy that Kitty used to study under a man named Eephus Purser, an old time fiddler who took the child prodigy to bluegrass festivals so she could learn from the best. By the time she turned fourteen, Kitty was already a headliner on the main stage. According to Josie, the only thing she didn't know was love, which eventually came in the form of Bosephus McCoy, who offered to be her road manager. He was about thirty years her senior, but she didn't mind. Obviously he didn't either, whipping out an engagement ring that had more diamonds than the girl had years. Against her parents' wishes, Kitty went off to Vegas and married the man who would only take off his black hat for church, the national anthem, and the occasional shower.

"So what happened to her?" said Eddy.

"People say she just vanished, but I know where she is."

"Where?"

"Right here!" said Josie, raising her hand above her head like a ballet dancer.

"Why didn't you ever tell me you used to play?"

"Just didn't want you walkin down the same path of wickedness. Liquor and lovin is the only thing a fiddle's good for."

"So was Bosephus my daddy?"

"Afraid so," said Josie, shaking her head. "He never made much of a husband or a father, but he was good at making enemies. He'd go out drinkin all hours of the night, leaving me alone to take care of two baby boys. Wasn't long til it all caught up with him."

"What happened?"

"Made the wrong man mad and wound up meetin the business end of a 12 gauge."

"You told me he ran off," said Eddy.

"I'm tellin you the truth now," said Josie, popping a couple of pills from her sweatshirt pocket. "I know I lied to a bunch of people about things, even changed my name when I moved myself out to Roughedge County."

"But why?"

"I wanted to raise you and Gabe right, give y'all a Christian constitution. Didn't want either of you to turn out like your folks. Figured it'd be better if you didn't know where you came from."

Eddy found it hard to digest all that he'd heard. For years, he'd fantasized that God had singled him out to bring new hope to Roughedge County through the power of his violin. In other words, he thought his talent had been immaculately conceived, not the afterwash of some dubious lineage.

While listening to his mother, however, he'd come to take some pride in his pedigree. He tried to imagine what his mother must have looked like on stage, revving up crowds all across Dixieland. Eddy wanted to follow in her footsteps.

"There's got to be a picture of you online," said Eddy, turning towards the keyboard.

"I reckon there is."

After searching some more, Eddy found a website devoted to Kitty Lorraine. In one photo, she wore a red cowgirl dress, complete with tassels. Her belly was about to burst wide open, just like her sweet-tea smile.

"That was when I was pregnant with Gabe," said Josie, pointing at the bulge on screen.

"I want to be just like you," said Eddy, feeling his body flood with adrenaline. "I want to be a star."

"It ain't that easy."

"You can get in touch with them people you used to know. They'll help me."

"Nobody ever knew what happened to Kitty Lorraine, and I aim for it to stay that way," said Josie, looking directly into her son's eyes. "Don't you ever tell nobody what you heard today."

"So long as you teach me how to play."

"I'll be danged if you'll ever play bluegrass. Look what it done did to me!"

"At least let Donald teach me some songs," said Eddy. "I want to have the same chance you had."

"But Satan's out there waitin at every turn. You just better stick to good clean music."

"I'm not gonna be led astray, momma. You know me better than that."

"I used to say the same thing."

"You and Donald's gonna be there the entire time. It'll be alright."

Josie stared at the photo on the screen, as tears dribbled down her warm cheeks.

"I've got to get back to work. It's about dinnertime."

“Will you just let me learn one song?” said Eddy, fingers crossed behind his back. “I’m not gonna do you wrong.”

“One song?”

“Just one.”

“Alright,” said Josie, taking in a deep breath. “But you better stay away from wine and women.”

“That’s a deal,” said Eddy, reaching out to hug his mother.

“And you better not tell anybody about Kitty Lorraine or Bosepheus McCoy,” said Josie. “Not even your brother. Donald’s the only other person out there who knows, and I shouldn’t even started runnin my mouth around him about it. Figured it’d help you get lessons years ago.”

“Don’t you worry, mom. It’ll be our secret forever.”

CHAPTER 11

On his way to Dylan's house, Eddy spotted a case of Miller Genuine Draft that someone had dumped on the side of the road. Two cans hadn't been opened. After making sure no one was watching, Eddy picked up the beer, already hot from the scorching sun. He stuffed the cans into his pockets and headed off.

"Check this out," said Eddy, handing off the treasure inside Dylan's room.

"Where'd you get these?"

"Found 'em on the road."

"You expect me to drink this shit?"

"They ain't been opened."

"Beer's gotta be cold, numb nuts."

“You’re the one that wanted to try it,” said Eddy, reaching out to take back the cans.

“I’ve had beer before,” said Dylan, hiding the cans behind his back. “Who you think I am?”

“Crack open them beers and we’ll talk.”

Eddy followed Dylan into the woods. He remembered the trail well, having helped Will blaze it some years ago. Now thick patches of briars jutted out both sides, forming a loose canopy above the path. Eddy was careful not to let the thorns pick away at his Ralph Lauren t-shirt.

They came upon a clearing where Will and Eddy used to set fires. Looking over at the old pit, he recalled when Will nearly burnt down the entire woods, courtesy of a shampoo bottle filled with gasoline. In those days, he would hold the bottle against his crotch and squeeze, making the flames moan. One day, however, he panicked when the fire went upstream, causing him to toss the bottle deep into the woods. Eddy nearly ruined a new pair of Nikes from stomping out the flames.

He considered bringing up those days, but didn’t want to remind Dylan about the times when Will used to be his bestfriend. Eddy didn’t think he’d remember anyway.

“I still ain’t sold all them chocolate bars,” said Dylan, taking a seat beside a tree. “Wonder if they’ll still let me go on that camping trip.”

“Got rid of mine last week. Let them old people at my momma’s rest home have 'em.”

“Better than what Will did,” said Dylan, cracking open a beer. “Fat ass done ate all his.”

“What?”

"Momma bout beat the shit out of him when she found out. Fag's gotta work the turkeyhouses all summer to pay that off."

"Screw that," said Eddy, opening his beer and raising it towards the treetops. "You ready for this?"

Dylan didn't even respond as he turned up the can. Eddy followed, but nearly gagged on the fizzy heat.

"Shit's hotter than hell," said Dylan.

"You can't handle it?"

"Better than nothin."

"Heard that," said Eddy, trying to unload the can in one gulp. Even though it smelled like Western Sizzlin yeast rolls, it tasted like a sour 7-Up.

"So my violin teacher's teachin me somethin new."

"Any Weezy?"

"Hell no," said Eddy, playing with a twig on the ground. "Donald's started me off with some stuff from musicals. He said ladies go crazy over that stuff."

"Like what?"

"Got me working on somethin from *Phantom of the Opera*. Says there's this one song that he knows'll work."

"Girls don't like opera."

"It ain't opera," said Eddy, throwing the twig at Dylan's face.

"Give it a whirl. Might work on that toothpick Amber."

"I don't like her no more."

Eddy looked the other way, unable to stare Dylan in the eyes.

"Been thinkin about it," said Dylan. "You might have a chance with her after all."

"Screw you."

“Listen, Funderburke. You need to hit that shit on the camping trip.”

“How’s that gonna happen.”

“Just bring your fiddle and serenade that ass.”

“Don’t know if my mom’ll let me bring it.”

“Just throw it in your bookbag,” said Dylan. “She ain’t gonna find out.”

“I can’t just whip up some tune in a couple of weeks,” said Eddy. “I need more time.”

“You’ll figure somethin out if you want to taste some Amber.”

“You’re the one who told me I shouldn’t be messing around with church girls.”

“I just figured it’d be a good ass to learn on,” said Dylan. “Get you ready for the big leagues.”

“Heard that,” said Eddy, peeking inside his empty beer can. “You feel anything yet?”

“Takes more than a beer to do somethin. Gotta get us some real liquor.”

“You mean like Bacardi?”

“Peach schnapps is what we need,” said Dylan, cracking his fingers. “Taste like pie but’ll get you fucked up as hell.”

“How we gonna get that?”

“I’ll figure out somethin,” said Dylan, smacking Eddy on the shoulders. “Just leave it up to me.”

CHAPTER 12

Claiming it was God's will, Preacher Manus let everyone go on the camping trip, even if they didn't sell their share of the chocolate. On the day of departure, it was already past 80 degrees even before the sun came up. By 6 in the morning, all the kids had assembled at Bunkum Creek Church, their excitement seeming to stymie any fatigue. The night before, Eddy spent the night over at Dylan's, not the best idea since neither of them got much sleep. However, they did a lot of planning for Operation Amber.

At the last minute, Preacher Manus' plans to rent a large passenger van fell through. All wasn't lost, thanks to Jenny Henderson's mom, who volunteered to pack some kids into her Ford Explorer. Everyone else got divided between the

preacher's Chevy Suburban and a supped-up 80's Firebird that belonged to Shelley Benton's husband.

"Dylan and Eddy's comin with me," said Shelley, flicking a Marlboro out into the parking lot.

The boys quickly squeezed into the back seat, knocking greasy rags and car magazines onto the floorboard. Behind the wheel was none other than Shelley's husband Jeremy, a wiry young buck who went by the name of J-Rock. Although he never appeared at Bunkum Creek Church, which Shelley attributed to his erratic hours as a roadie for a Charlotte hardcore band, he was known throughout the community for turning junk cars into wild creations that he would unleash on country roads. The Firebird had become one of the notorious cars in Roughedge County.

"Think there's room enough for Amber?" said Eddy, looking out the window, sad to see her climbing inside Preacher Manus' SUV.

"Last thing we need is an Abernathy up in here," said Shelley, snapping the seat belt.

"That's for damn sure," said J-Rock, throwing the Firebird in reverse.

"Pull up to the preacher," said Shelley. "Looks like we have to deal with his ass before taking off."

Dylan and Eddy smiled at one another, knowing that Shelley was wilder than she let on. Even though he wouldn't call her hot, Eddy sometimes thought about her when he masturbated. She had a stout body – big hips and large breasts – that made her indisputably sexy despite her overbite.

After J-Rock got side-by-side with the preacher's SUV, he let Shelley do the talking.

"We forgot somethin at the house," she said. "We'll meet up down the road."

"You have the directions, right?" said Preacher Manus, dangling a lit cig from the window.

"Right here," she said, lifting up the printout that the minister passed out earlier.

"I guess we'll see you when you get there," said Preacher Manus, wiping his brow with his free hand.

J-Rock drove off, kicking up a bit of gravel as he turned out of the parking lot. He drove past the Spurlock house and made a sharp right onto a dirt driveway.

"Y'all ain't seen my place, have ya?" said Shelley, turning around to face the boys.

Eddy shook his head while Dylan said that he had often biked past it.

"We're gonna let them get down the road a bit," said J-Rock, pulling up to their house trailer nestled in the pines. "Goddamn convoy of Bible thumpers."

"Just wait right here," said Shelley. "We'll be right back."

After Shelley and J-Rock walked inside, it wasn't long before Dylan opened his mouth.

"That's our liquor ticket," said Dylan. "One of them'll hook us up."

"You gonna ask?"

"Why don't you do it?" said Dylan.

"You do it, mother fletcher."

"Your momma teach you to talk like that?"

Conversation came to a close when Shelley stepped out of the screen door. Eddy tried not to stare at her tight jeans, which fit like a second skin around her bulky thighs. J-Rock

had put on a mesh tanktop that showed off his mane of chest hair.

"You boys been jerkin' off in here?" said J-Rock, as he dropped into the driver's seat.

"Learned it from watching you," said Dylan, nudging Eddy in the ribs.

"One look at my dick and your balls would fall off."

"Why don't you try me?"

"It's gonna be a long ride to the mountains," said Shelley, lighting up another Marlboro.

They hadn't even made it to Gastonia before Dylan threw out the question.

"Y'all mind pullin over to the ABC store so we can get some peach schnapps?"

"Peach schnapps?" said J-Rock. "What kind of fruitcakes are you?"

"We can't be gettin you boys drunk on this trip," said Shelley. "Preacher'd have my ass."

"Can we pick up some on the way home?" asked Dylan.

"You boys desperate," said J-Rock.

"How about just a 12 pack of MGD?"

"Y'all come over to the trailer next weekend," said Shelley. "We'll pick you up somethin, so long as y'all don't try to go nowhere."

"Can we invite Amber?" asked Eddy.

"Hell no," said Shelley. "Don't need goddamn Abe Abernathy on my ass. Josie Funderburke's bad enough."

"Y'all just don't break my shit," said J-Rock, tapping his hand against the steering wheel.

"Don't worry," said Shelley. "We can handle them if they get too out of line."

A couple hours later, they turned off I-40 to meet everybody at Lake Junaluska for lunch. When they pulled up to the picnic area, Preacher Manus and the others had already set out the spread. Except for Eddy, no one in the Firebird seemed concerned that they were a half-hour late.

"As long as there's some potted meat around, I'm good to go," said J-Rock, ripping up the hand brake. "Everybody out!"

Nearly everyone was already sitting down at picnic tables, covered with large bags of Doritos and 2-liter sodas. Eddy filled a plastic cup full of Mountain Dew before heading over to the grill, where Preacher Manus got behind some hamburgers and hot dogs. Eddy rolled his eyes when he saw the apron – *Who Will Jesus Grill?*

Eddy built a burger and loaded up on Doritos, ignoring the green mountains out in the distance. Approaching the picnic table, he thought about squeezing in between Jenny and Amber, but he got too nervous. Instead, he walked back to meet Dylan, who was slapping mustard across some hot dogs.

"Let's take this back to the car," said Dylan. "Got somethin to talk about."

Eddy cautiously followed Dylan towards the Firebird, hoping that Preacher Manus wouldn't force them to eat with the other youth. Leaning up against the car, he took a bite out of his hamburger, making ketchup drip off the sides and onto the grass. He jumped out of the way as if a grenade had landed, trying to keep stains off his new khaki shorts. With Amber around, there was no room for error.

"Cool it, spaz. Gotta be slick if you want a chance with Shelley."

"What the heck you talkin about?"

“She totally wants us,” said Dylan, chomping into a hot dog.

“She’s married.”

“J-Rock ain’t there half the time. And hell, just look at the way she walks. You can tell she’s craving some dick.”

“Why don’t you go for it then?”

“Maybe I will,” said Dylan. “Figured we might both get a crack at her.”

“With J-Rock around?”

“Look at it this way. If she has us over there when J-Rock’s probably gonna be on the road, she’s only got one thing in mind. Why else would she be buying us liquor?”

“Heard that,” said Eddy. “But I’m still goin for Amber.”

“Have ‘em both. Ain’t no need to be stingy.”

“I can’t do it with a married woman. That’s an automatic ticket to Hell.”

“I’d be more afraid of J-Rock,” said Dylan, already working on the second hot dog.

“She ain’t gonna have us over there anyway.”

“We’ll see about that.”

After setting up tents in Great Smoky Mountains National Park later that day, most of the kids went hiking with Preacher Manus. Eddy, however, decided to take a nap. When he woke up a couple hours later, he saw Amber Abernathy walking alone in the nearby woods. He took it as a sign that everything was working out in his favor, even though Josie didn’t allow Eddy to bring his fiddle on the trip.

“Trying to find some firewood?”

“You know we’re not supposed to do that,” said Amber, crossing her arms as Eddy approached.

“You like it out here?” said Eddy, hoping to come off as smooth as Dylan.

“I’m bored.”

“That’s a nice Abercrombie shirt.”

“Thanks,” said Amber, turning away.

Trying not to stare at her breasts, Eddy noticed a couple of mosquito bites on her arms.

“They’re eatin you up too?”

“What?”

“Skeeters,” said Eddy, smiling.

“Where you born in a barn?”

“Whatchu mean?”

“Mo-SKEE-toes,” said Amber, squinting her eyes. “They’re called mosquitoes.”

“My bad,” said Eddy, kicking a nugget of cloudy quartz across the forest floor.

“No prob,” said Amber, gazing past Eddy’s shoulder.

He turned around to see that Dylan had come out of the tent.

“I know this might sound strange,” said Eddy, his voice breaking as he tried to look at Amber’s face.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” said Eddy, sticking his hands in his pockets.

He felt as if he were shivering, even though it was a warm August night.

“Tell me.”

“Are you going with anyone?”

“Eddy!”

“What?”

“This is embarrassing,” said Amber, smacking her arms.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," said Amber, looking up at the blue sky. "It's just."

"What?"

"I don't know."

Eddy looked down at his Nautica t-shirt, watching the blue fabric slop over his belly. She didn't need to say anything else. He felt like a moron for approaching a cheerleader, knowing that she was beyond his reach, even if she were a couple years younger.

"I wasn't trying to ask you out."

"You totally were."

"Was not."

"Go get her Funderburke!" shouted Dylan, making a megaphone out of his hands.

Eddy looking around to find that everyone – including Preacher Manus – had returned to camp. He couldn't believe that Dylan had blown his cover.

"Now look what you've done!"

"I'm sorry," said Eddy, wanting to touch Amber as she stomped back towards the campsite.

"You're a hick, Eddy Funderburke."

"But I play the violin!"

"Don't matter," said Amber, turning around to face him. "You'll never be nothing but trailer trash."

As the youth group broke out into applause at Amber's outburst, Eddy thought about turning the other way and losing himself in the woods. Dylan, however, came out to meet him halfway, slinging his arm around the deflated teenager as they walked back to camp together.

“You’ll get ‘em next time,” said Dylan, leaning into his ear. “Told you not to fuck around with church pussy.”

CHAPTER 13

By the time violin lessons came back around, Eddy still wasn't over all that Amber said the weekend before. She had told the entire youth group that he'd confessed his everlasting love out in the woods, making Mr. Funderburke the punchline of nearly every joke for the remainder of the trip. Even when Preacher Manus tried to put a stop to the wisecracks, Eddy noticed that the old man could barely suppress his smile.

"Never did like the idea of you being in that youth group anyways," said Josie, taking a couple Frosties and a sack of fries from the Wendy's drive-thru window.

"You mean I don't have to go no more?"

"Didn't say that," said Josie. "Preacher Manus is still a man of God."

"But he was laughing too."

"Don't you blaspheme like that, little man. You know as well as I do that Preacher Manus wouldn't never do anything to hurt you."

"He didn't tell people to shut up."

"God works in mysterious ways," said Josie, pulling out a Salem. "Best thing for you is to just move on. Women'll just get you sidetracked from that fiddle anyway."

Eddy figured it best to give up the debate. He was simply happy that – despite it all – Josie remained willing to let him learn some popular music, which he hoped would eventually lure someone in. And even though things didn't work out with Amber, he knew that Dylan would try to fix something up as soon as the school year started. If nothing else, there was still the prospect of taking Shelley Benton, so long as Josie let him spend the night at Dylan's the following weekend.

"I promised I'd be up front with you," said Josie, tossing her cigarette out the window. "Figured you should know that I met somebody special."

"Whatchu talkin about?"

"His name is Stu," said Josie, her teeth glittering in the sun. "Stu Sneed."

Eddy couldn't believe what he was hearing. Even though he knew that his mother had been looking for a man, he hoped it would be a passing fad, like her fleeting interest in needlepoint.

"He took me out to dinner while you was away."

Eddy stared straight ahead, focusing his gaze on a McDonald's sign in the distance.

"Ain't you gonna say somethin?"

"Like what?"

"Thought you'd care," said Josie, digging out a prescription bottle from her pocketbook. "He's a good Christian man."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"He'll soon be startin as a professor of southern studies at Piedmont College. Just moved here after teaching up in Rhode Island."

"Where's that?"

"Somewhere up north."

"You seeing a Yankee?"

"He ain't no Yankee. Comes from the midwest, which he said is kinda like the south."

"Whatever."

"He might as well be a southern gentleman," said Josie. "He knows more about our way of life than anybody I've ever met."

"Does he know that you're Kitty Lorraine?"

"Don't even start," said Josie. "He'll be over at the house before too long, and you better keep your trap shut."

"I'll be over at Dylan's."

"You gonna be here to meet him."

"Don't want to."

"Listen here mister, you gotta accept that your momma's lookin to remarry. I done told you I can't depend on you and Gabe for the rest of my life."

Eddy crossed his arms as Josie pulled into the parking lot of Donald's apartment complex. He looked over at his mother's chest – cut in two from the seatbelt, making her boobs pop out. Her plunge neckline revealed a sliver of black lace, a bra he didn't recognize.

Donald's shittzu went nuts when Eddy rang the doorbell. As his teacher said hello and offered hugs, Eddy figured out why he'd found new lingerie in the dirty clothes. *Must be wearin it for Stu Sneed*.

"Got that 'Music of the Night' ready to go?"

"It's right here," said Eddy, unlatching the violin case.

After tuning the fiddle, he nodded at Donald and began playing. As he unfurled the song, he let go of his feelings, hoping to translate them into sound. Letting the lyrics stream through his mind, he tried to imagine the music caressing his mother, allowing the odd couple to surrender to their darkest dreams. No room for Stu Sneed in this fantasy.

"Can you hear that Josie?" screamed Donald. "He's got it!"

"It's the Lord guiding him," said Josie, marching into the living room.

As Eddy brought the song to a close, he visualized his mother's breasts fresh from the shower, orbs glowing with crystal beads. Opening his eyes, he was disappointed to find reality standing before him, Josie's revealing neckline now choked by a cardigan, thanks to the relentless air conditioning.

"I never knew you could play so beautifully," said Donald, wiping away a tear.

"It's gonna take him far," said Josie. "Them slant-eyes ain't got nothin on him if he keeps this up."

"Eddy," whispered Donald, signaling that Eddy should join him on the couch. "I think there's a cruise ship gig out there with your name on it."

"Forget that," said Josie. "Move over Shoji Tabuchi!"

“Eddy Funderburke in Branson,” said Donald, hugging his prize student. “I can see it now!”

As Eddy tried to fathom such futures, he couldn’t silence the thought that popular music was simply a step down. Even though Donald had drilled into him that showmanship was just as important as virtuosity, he knew that he was selling out. But he figured it was part of his destiny, knowing his lineage. And the price seemed worth it, so long as it eventually got him laid.

“Can we keep him on the Webber songbook, Josie?”

“Whatchu think, little man?”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Eddy, forcing a smile.

“Just keep doing whatever you doing,” said Josie, taking out a Salem. “Won’t be long before you’re a star.”

July 20

Back when it was me and Will I'd go over there while his great-grandma was hooked up to oxygen. Said we can't be lighten up no matches but we'd only set fires in the woods anyway where nobody would find us. Mom'd ask me why I smell like burning but I just say we're out there lightin up black snakes and she wouldn't say nothin.

We'd go back to Will's room with all them pictures on the wall. Back then he really wanted Teri. but she like me more. Caught will praying about it one day saying he just wanted some girl to like him cause he so fat. Never let him know I heard. Then there was when he wanted me to take pictures of him with no underwear. Even stole the camera from his mom's bedroom.

Wonder if he remember that.

CHAPTER 14

Even though the sun was almost down, it was still hot and sticky as Eddy followed Dylan to Shelley's trailer. The smell of the surrounding turkeyhouses seemed more potent than usual in the twilight. After taking a trail that led them through some pines, Eddy saw the familiar doublewide come into view. But this time he noticed that half the roof consisted of blue tarps and clear sheets of plastic.

"Got your rubber ready?"

"Right here," said Eddy, smacking his back pocket.

"Let's do this."

Eddy let Dylan knock on the door. It didn't take long for Shelley's eyes to appear in the tiny window.

“Well if it ain’t Roughedge County’s finest,” said Shelley, shouting over the TV as she opened the door. “Y’all come on in.”

“Don’t mind if we do,” said Dylan, reaching out to receive a hug.

Eddy followed suit, pushing his chest against Shelley as hard as he could, making her nearly fall over.

“Got your peach schnapps,” said Shelley, nodding towards the dining room table, where a half-gallon bottle served as centerpiece. “Can’t believe you drink that shit.”

“It’s smooth,” said Dylan, cracking open the bottle.

“Nothin can beat a Michelob,” said Shelley, taking a dark brown bottle out of the refrigerator. She twisted off the cap – gold foil still attached – and took a seat at the dining room table.

“J-Rock makin it back tonight?”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. Last time I talked to him he was still up in West Virginia with the band.”

“You mean he’s leaving you alone with two studs like us?” said Dylan, taking a seat beside Eddy.

“You boys wouldn’t even know what to do with it.”

“Don’t underestimate the Party Boyz,” said Dylan, referring to the fictional gang name he’d thought up for Eddy and himself.

“You just keep it in your drawers cause I ain’t buyin it. And the last thing you want is a J-Rock on your ass.”

“Heard that,” said Eddy, reaching over for the peach schnapps.

As the boys drank from plastic cups, Shelley lit up a cigarette and poked the pack towards Eddy. He refused with a

wave, but Dylan reached out for a Marlboro, snatching the pink lighter off the table.

Eddy looked out into the living room, where posters of Jeff Gordon were taped to the wood paneling. A bookshelf held more NASCAR memorabilia, including miniature cars, collectible cups, trading cards, and signed pictures. Eddy recognized most of the knickknacks from promotions at McDonalds.

"See that picture in the middle?" said Shelley, watching Eddy's roaming eyes.

Eddy walked over and found a framed photograph of Shelley with her arms around #24. She looked a bit younger, probably because of the pixilation.

"We was drinkin at Red Lobster, and here he came strolling in," said Shelley. "Beats me why he'd just drop in like that. People were on him like fire ants."

"He got that European wife with him?" said Eddy.

"Everybody knows Jeff Gordon's a fag," said Dylan. "He just married that bitch to keep people off his ass."

"You mean remarried," said Shelley, slamming the beer on the table. "And don't be comin up in here talkin smack about Jeff Gordon and expecting me to get y'all drunk."

"My bad," said Dylan, nudging Eddy in the thigh.

"It's just gonna be a long night if you keep that shit up."

It didn't take long for Dylan and Eddy to put down the peach schnapps. By the time the ten o'clock news came on, the bottle was empty. Shelley told them not to worry, that they could always follow it with a bottle of George Dickel No. 8 that she kept around for emergencies. But Eddy didn't think he would need it. His stomach felt heavy from the syrupy liquor, sending him deeper into nausea.

He stretched out on the living room sofa, wondering what Josie – let alone Preacher Manus – would think if she could see him. As the taste of metal oozed across his tongue, something seemed incurably wrong, as if God was punishing him for following the path of sin. He thought about using the telephone to make a confession to his mother, asking her to pick him up and offer forgiveness. Instead, he closed his eyes and offered silent prayers.

"Don't be passin out on us," said Shelley, giving him a gentle smack on the face.

"I'll be fine," said Eddy, trying to find enough strength to sit up.

"Got any pornos? That'll get him up."

"I've been tellin y'all I ain't got such a thang. No home movies, no amateur shit, nothin."

"You at least gotta have a deck of cards," said Dylan.

"Maybe I do."

"Think you can get off your ass enough to play strip poker, Funderburke?"

Eddy gave him the thumbs up, as if he had just survived plowing into Turn 4 at Daytona. But went Dylan went to pull him off the couch, Eddy's world became a bit too topsy-turvy. With each turn, it felt like Sudafed was climbing up his throat. Knowing he didn't have time to make it to the bathroom, he hauled ass into the kitchen, where the sink was filled with fresh ears of corn. He reached down and opened the dishwasher, drenching the dirty dishes in orange splatter.

"You a sick motherfucker," said Dylan, standing at the far end of the kitchen.

"At least he can aim."

"Well don't look at the cabinets."

When Eddy looked around, he noticed that the particle board looked like a Jackson Pollock.

"I'll clean it up," said Eddy, rushing off to the bathroom.

He drenched his face in cold water, using some to rinse his mouth, but it wouldn't faze the acid burn. After reaching below for some Listerine, he chugged it bottom's up, but the traces of alcohol made him gag.

"You alright in there?" said Shelley.

"I'll make it," said Eddy, on his knees before the toilet.

Even after he gave his all, his diaphragm tried to throw more into the bowl. It felt like a sinister case of the hiccups. Didn't help when he looked at the flipped-up lid that read "CHURCH."

By the time the dry heaving stopped, Eddy felt ready to live again. He still had a buzz, but no longer felt consumed. Cleaning up, he felt like a dork for praying on the couch.

"You feelin better?" said Dylan, seated at the kitchen table.

"Ready to rock," said Eddy, pulling up a chair.

Shelley was beside him, shuffling the cards.

"So the name of this game is strip poker," said Shelley. "Figured you boys know how it works."

Eddy had never played with such wagers on the line. He considered himself a solid hustler, even though he had only faced computer programs. He figured that his chances of winning were even greater playing in the flesh, and he hoped Dylan had skills. Even though his stomach didn't quite feel up for banging his youth counselor, Eddy knew there was still one major objective – get Shelley Benton naked.

Eddy's first two hands were solid – three kings followed by a full house. Dylan seemed just as capable, slamming

down a straight and then two pairs. Seemed that only Shelley didn't have her game. Already she had taken off her hair tie and one of her earrings.

"That shit don't count," said Dylan, pissed that it was going to take a wild streak of luck if she kept this up.

Shelley had nearly eighteen piercings in her ears, a neon assortment of rubber bracelets, and more rings than Liberace.

"You afraid you ain't got what it takes?" said Shelley.

"Rules say you got to take off clothing not jewelry."

"Gonna shuffle those cards or just suck your thumb all night?"

After losing a couple more hands, Shelley hardly let Dylan and Eddy have a chance. She showed no remorse as the boys stripped down to their basics. And when it came time for Eddy to peel off his BVDs, Shelley still had at least a dozen studs in her ears.

"I'm tired of this," said Dylan, slamming down his cards.

He was only wearing some boxers and a white Adidas sock.

"You the ones who wanted to play," said Shelley, looking over at Eddy's naked body.

His belly was up against the table, trying to block any view of his privates.

"Can I put my clothes back on?"

"Who said we're finished?" said Shelley. "I wanna watch Dylan go all the way."

"You go first," said Dylan. "Ain't nothin stopping you."

"You really want to see me get naked?"

"What do you think?" said Dylan, looking over at Eddy.

"Up for some night swimming?"

"You got a Sunnyside membership?" said Eddy.

“Got a pond back there,” said Shelley. “Dare you to jump in buck naked.”

“You wanna go skinny dippin?” said Dylan.

“It’s the only way to go,” said Shelley. “Looks like Eddy’s ready to jump in.”

“I ain’t goin out there,” said Eddy. “Bound to get bit by a snapping turtle.”

“Don’t be scared, Funderburke,” said Dylan, smacking Eddy on the thigh. “Only water moccasins out there.”

“You go then.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Start taking it off,” said Shelley.

“Ladies first.”

“Not if you want to see me naked.”

“Alright then,” said Dylan, getting up from the table.

He turned around and pulled down his boxer shorts, exposing a bleached-out ass.

“I’ll meet y’all out there,” said Shelley.

“Don’t be trying to bullshit us,” said Dylan.

“Does this look like I’m fuckin around?” Shelley pulled off her shirt, revealing a tan push-up bra. “I’ll see you out there after I visit the ladies room.”

“Why don’t you piss in the pond?”

“Just get your ass out there before you get as hard as Eddy.”

As Dylan and Shelley broke out in laughter, Eddy’s face took on the color of cranberry sauce.

“Let’s just go,” said Eddy, picking up his clothes off the floor.

“You got to leave that inside if you wanna play.”

“Why?”

"How will I know that you won't run off?

"You heard the lady," said Dylan. "Let's get outside."

Even though it was nearly midnight, the air was still warm and moist. Standing naked under the stars was enough to sober Eddy. While he wished there was another bottle of peach schnapps around, he wanted to go home and forget this ever happened.

"You see that?" said Dylan, pointing at the shadows in Shelley's bedroom. "Told you we're gonna get a piece."

"What if she tells J-Rock?"

"Ain't no way in hell. You think she'd confess to fucking us while her man was away?"

"Guess not," said Eddy, trying not to look down at Dylan's package, visible in the moonlight. Out of nervousness, he tried to tuck his hands in his pockets, only to find nothing there.

"Check her out!"

Eddy looked into the window to find that Shelley had pulled back the blinds. And there she was, letting it all hang out – just as naked as the boys. She pressed her tits up against the window, making them look like poached eggs with a cherry yoke. The boys hollered as she turned around and bent over, her ass barely visible through the glass.

"We gonna double team that bitch," said Dylan, noticeably aroused.

"Let's jump into the pond."

"And miss this?" said Dylan, pointing at the window. "I'm waiting til she gets out here."

Even though Eddy liked the show, he wanted to hide his nakedness. But there was no way he'd leap into the dark pond by himself. He decided to pace around, waiting for Shelley to

come out. It wasn't long before she'd turned off all the lights inside. Then a corner floodlight shined down upon them.

"What the heck is happening?" said Eddy, still turned away from Dylan.

"She's just on her way outside. Chill, Funderburke."

"I'm going back in."

"And ruin this?"

"If she's already naked, it don't matter."

Eddy walked past Dylan and tried the front door. It was locked. Without consulting his bestfriend, he rang the doorbell and pounded the glass. Shelley didn't respond.

"She's just teasing us," said Dylan.

"Like hell," said Eddy, feeling his stomach shake each time he beat the glass pane.

"Y'all go home!" said Shelley, standing behind the front door.

She switched off the floodlamp, leaving the boys in near darkness.

"Give us back our clothes!"

"Why don't you try acting like gentlemen for once?"

"Please!" said Eddy, his heart pumping madly at the thought of walking home naked.

"You gotta promise me you ain't gonna act like a bunch of dicks next time someone gets you liquored up."

"We promise!" said Eddy.

"I ain't heard Dylan yet."

"I promise," said Dylan, sounding like someone had knocked the air out of his lungs.

Shelley opened up the door and threw out a wad of clothes, along with a couple pairs of shoes. She'd since put on a robe.

“This’ll teach you how to respect a lady.”

“You ain’t gonna tell J-Rock, right?”

“I’ll let you talk to him about it, Eddy Funderburke.”

“Let’s just keep this between us,” said Dylan. “We’re sorry.”

“You both better be at youth group on Sunday.”

“You mean everything’s cool?”

“Get your clothes and go home before I change my mind,” said Shelley. “Y’all about the dumbest boys I ever seen.”

After Shelley shut the door, Eddy sorted through the clothes, grateful that everything was there. Once they wrapped themselves up, they walked back down the moonlit trail, eager to get home.

“That crazy bitch,” said Dylan, shaking his head.

“You think she’s gonna tell our parents?”

“What’s she gonna say?” said Dylan. “I got your sons fucked up and made them take off their clothes? Get over it, Funderburke.”

Eddy decided to keep all his doubts inside, keeping silent as he followed Dylan on the pavement.

“Could use some more peach schnapps right about now,” said Dylan, kicking a rock as they walked up his driveway.

“That’s for damn sure.”

CHAPTER 15

A couple of weeks later, Eddy went back-to-school shopping with his mother. Ever since that night at Shelley's, he'd been afraid that something would get back to Josie. During youth group meetings, Shelley acted like nothing ever happened, but it wasn't enough to put Eddy at ease. In fact, every time that he was alone with his mother, he was nervous that she'd spring knowledge on him with great fanfare, like those TV shows where the host reveals footage of a cheating lover to an unruly wife.

"I'm tired of going to youth group," said Eddy, hoping his mother would keep him from the embarrassment of seeing Shelley every weekend.

“Don’t go down that road again. You know where I stand.”

“But the preacher’s makin us do the worship service in a few weeks.”

“What’s so bad about that?”

“It’s embarrassing,” said Eddy, crossing his arms. “Everybody’s gonna make a fool of themselves.”

“Don’t talk like that,” said Josie, shoving her finger in Eddy’s face. “Bible says you’ll go straight to Hell for callin someone a fool.”

“I’m sorry,” said Eddy, hoping this wasn’t the beginning of Josie’s tell-all about his night at Shelley’s.

“You better have a little talk with Jesus, young man.”

“Dylan and me’s thinkin about taking up collection,” said Eddy, trying to steer the conversation back into safe territory. “Figured it’d be hard to mess that up.”

“Why don’t you play the fiddle?”

“Amber’s already in charge of the music.”

“You can play the prelude. Don’t let that hussy steal the show.”

“But I don’t know no hymns.”

“Ain’t too late to get crackin on 'em.”

“If I do it, can I quit the youth group right afterward?”

“That youth group’s doin you a world of good,” said Josie, firing up a Salem. “You’ll be fine once you stand up at the altar and show everybody your God-given talent.”

Eddy tried to take her encouragement as a sign that he was in the clear. Besides, she was taking him to Carolina Place in Pineville, letting him shuffle through the department store sales instead of hitting up TJ Maxx. He figured that was enough to prove that he was in the clear.

All his anxieties drifted away as he watched the light twinkle atop the mall's glass and steel canopy. Pulling off the I-485 exit ramp, he gazed at Applebee's, Olive Garden, and TGI Friday's, worlds he yearned to enter. He would often tell his mother that the prices were no more expensive than A1 Super Chinese Buffet, but for reasons he never understood, she would never take him inside.

Josie wheeled into a handicapped spot, ordering her son to take the blue tag out of the glove box. When Eddy once asked about it, she claimed that she was borrowing it from someone at the rest home, but that'd been at least five years ago. They never had any trouble with the tag, especially since Josie would tell her son to walk like a retard if mall security came driving by.

They entered the mall through the food court, where neon lights advertised everything from Mandarin Express to Sbarro. Eddy noticed that most of the mothers – some of them fumbling Blackberrys – looked like they spent hours in the gym, wearing curled-up hairdos like women on shampoo commercials. For the first time ever, he felt ashamed to be seen with his mother, whose busty frame suggested that she hadn't exercised since school. Even though he felt that she was still beautiful – a majestic figure that he willingly touched in dreams – he was embarrassed that she didn't fit the mold.

"Let's high tail it to Belk's," said Josie, stepping onto the escalator.

When they got off on the second floor, Eddy stood transfixed before Abercrombie & Fitch, another place his mother wouldn't allow him to enter. He immediately thought of Amber's t-shirt, the one she wore on the camping trip.

“Let’s check it out,” said Eddy, hoping that his mother would give in this time.

“You know they ain’t got no sales,” said Josie.

“Sign right there says *Sale*.”

“Let’s hit Belk’s first,” said Josie. “We can come back.”

“But mom,” said Eddy, trying to taper his whine. “I know what I want.”

“Let’s just take a look for me, OK?”

Eddy nodded his head, rarely removing his gaze from the floor as they walked to Belk. The entrance displayed the latest styles from Polo and Tommy Hilfiger, but Eddy looked towards the florescent lights and sighed as his mom went straight for the sales racks. She held a red and green striped shirt against his chest, some Freddy Krueger castoff. It was marked down 35%.

“Can’t we just look for your stuff?” asked Eddy.

“We’re here to get you ready for school,” said Josie.

“I don’t want to spend all day long pickin through the sales racks.”

“You better hush your mouth,” said Josie, pouring white pills into her palm. “Most mothers back home wouldn’t drive their sons all the way to Pineville.”

Eddy watched her swallow the pills. He thought about asking her how she did it without water, but he didn’t want to fan the flames. After all, he still wanted his Abercrombie.

He let Josie fumble through the sales racks, hoping she wouldn’t find anything so cheap that it warranted a purchase despite his disapproval. She yanked out a couple of shirts his size, but he silently put them away after inspecting them, as if they smelled like rotten milk.

It wasn't long before Josie gave up and walked over to the women's collections. Eddy was embarrassed that his mother wouldn't look at anything but Liz Claiborne, even if she did pull out some of the more sensual cuts from the screechy racks. The clothes threatened to made her look older than her 32 years, but Eddy kept silent, hoping her fashion gaffs might derail her relationship with Professor Stu Sneed, which seemed to grow more intense each passing week.

"Meet me at Abercrombie," said Eddy, as she fumbled with her creditcards at the checkout counter, walking away before she could protest.

Eddy was proud to be walking through the mall alone, feeling a jolt of adrenaline serge through his veins as Abercrombie and Fitch came into view. He came alive as the music and musk washed over him.

"Welcome to Abercrombie," shouted a sprightly girl, the type he figured went to college.

"Thanks," said Eddy, approaching the first table, which held dozens of jeans made to look like hand-me-downs. He tried not to sour his face as he looked at the price tag.

"The destroyed bootcut is in again this season," said a male sales clerk, brushing by. "It's been updated for the fall collection."

Eddy ran his hands over the soft denim. He was afraid to say anything to the employee, sensing that he would know that Eddy was a hick, unable to distinguish style.

Just when he started to accept that Abercrombie was too luxurious, he spotted a group of mothers in the back room. When he approached, he uncovered a bounty of discounted clothes. He jumped in with the women, grabbing anything that looked cool regardless of size.

“Looks like you’re gettin somewhere,” said Josie, surprising Eddy from behind.

“It’s all on sale! Just look at all this.”

Josie snatched some of the clothes off Eddy’s arm and began checking out the sizes.

“Half of them won’t even fit,” she said.

“You’re the one who says each brand’s different.”

Before she could continue to protest, he whisked her towards the dressing rooms, armed with at least two-dozen garments.

“You can only take ten at a time,” said an Abercrombie representative, as he unlocked the door.

“She can hold the others,” said Eddy, pointing towards her as if she were his personal shopper.

Inside the fitting room, Eddy hung the clothes on a metal hook beside his head. After he undressed to his white socks and BVDs, he stared at his belly, relentlessly white under the florescent tubes. He sucked it in and stuck out his chest, which looked like two giggly pouches about the size of wallets. He tried to ignore the patches of fat above his knees.

“How’s everything?” asked the sales clerk from behind the door.

“Alright,” said Eddy, as he buttoned a navy blue shirt.

Even though it hung way off his shoulders, he felt it might work if he rolled up the cuffs. He paired it with some khaki shorts – accented with puffy square pockets – that were a few sizes larger than he would normally wear. Once they were buttoned and zipped, there was enough room around the waist to insert both of his fists.

“Tried anything yet?” his mother said, to Eddy’s embarrassment.

"Yep."

"Let me see."

"It fits," said Eddy.

"Open up."

"Don't you trust me?" said Eddy, searching for someway to cinch the waist.

"If I'm paying for it, I better be seeing it."

Eddy reluctantly opened the door. He left the shirt untucked to cover the loose shorts.

"Lift up that shirt."

"That's how I'm gonna wear it."

Josie walked into the fitting room – still holding the extra clothes – and locked the door behind them.

"Whatchu doing?" said Eddy, as she began tucking in the shirt, teasing his privates while she worked the front.

"Only one person in the fitting room," said the sales attendant, tapping the door.

"Those shorts might fit Gabe, but not you," said Josie, as she jerked down the garment.

"Please come out, miss."

"Don't you hear him?" said Eddy, feeling like he was burning inside.

"I'm just here with my son," said Josie, loud enough for the entire store to hear.

"It's against store policy to have more than one person in the fitting room."

"Better let me be if you want my business."

Eddy heard the man walk away. He was still embarrassed but grateful that the crisis had been averted.

“We’d never had this problem at Belk’s,” said Josie, getting another shirt ready for her son. “They’re a family operation.”

Right after Eddy stripped down again, there was another knock on the door.

“This is the manager,” said a sassy voice. “Do we have a problem?”

“I’m just helping my son.”

“It’s against our policy, ma’am. You’ll have to come out this instant.”

“But he’s got Down’s Syndrome. He can’t put on clothes right.”

“I ain’t no retard,” said Eddy, trying to jump back into his clothes.

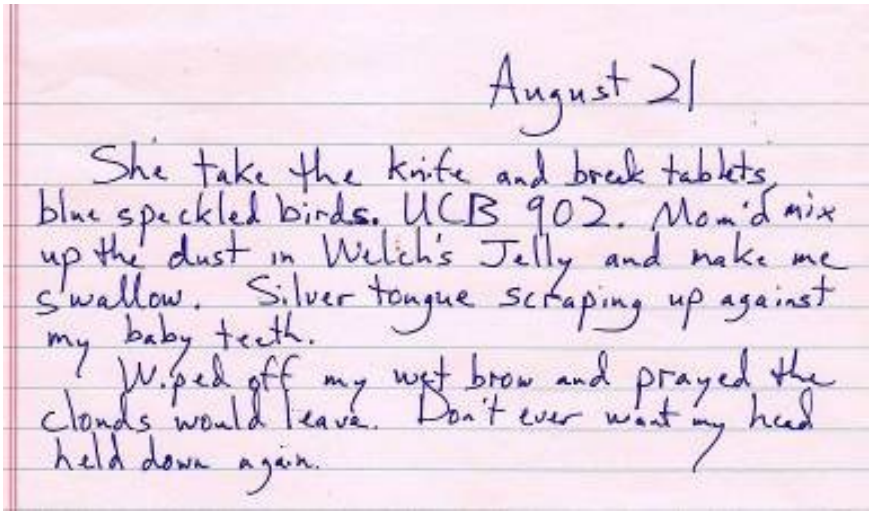
“Please cooperate with us, ma’am. We don’t want to involve the police.”

“You’d have a lawsuit on your hands quicker than you can spell lawyer.”

“My associate has just notified mall security.”

“I’ll see you at the car,” whispered Josie, opening the fitting room door.

As she walked away, Eddy stood paralyzed, his naked belly exposed to the assembled crowd. With the precision of a laser, he put on his Beethoven t-shirt and bolted out of the store.



August 21

She take the knife and break tablets blue speckled birds. UCB 902. Mom'd mix up the dust in Welch's Jelly and make me swallow. Silver tongue scraping up against my baby teeth.

Wiped off my wet brow and prayed the clouds would leave. Don't ever want my head held down again.

CHAPTER 16

On his first day as a sophomore, Eddy wore a new Nautica knit and a pair of Perry Ellis shorts that Josie eventually bought him at TJ Maxx. Walking into the main hall, he gazed at the segregated crowds: jocks and rednecks, cheerleaders and goths, geeks and druggies. Everyone seemed somewhat excited to be back at Robert F. Williams High.

Eddy walked by the preps, eyeing shirts tattooed with "Abercrombie." Instead of hoping to fit in this year, he kept on walking, trying to block out the insults and laughter. Feeling his pulse quicken, he prayed that he would soon bump into Dylan. Unfortunately he was nowhere around, leaving Eddy staring at the ground as he stumbled to homeroom.

His luck changed at lunch, when he found Dylan standing around the picnic tables in the courtyard. They exchanged a finger-snap slap that they'd perfected ever since the night at Shelley's house. But even before Eddy could get a word out, he noticed Dylan looking out in the distance.

"Well if it ain't Kaitlin Snodgrass."

"Dylan Spurlock," she said, her arms stretched out like the jaws of an alligator.

Eddy couldn't take his eyes off her titties, putting a major strain on an Express t-shirt. With some effort, he pulled his eyes up to her blonde hair, cut in curvy layers. He barely noticed Kaitlin's friend, mopping along behind her.

"Dyslectic Duo, meet my man Jean-Paul."

"What?" said Kaitlin, looking over at Eddy.

"He's an exchange student from France," said Dylan. "Been livin with me all summer long."

"No way!" said Kaitlin, her blue eyes beaming.

"Ask Jean-Paul if you don't believe me."

Eddy started to laugh, nudging Dylan with his elbows.

"Who are you really?"

"Eddy, Eddy Funderburke."

"Did you transfer?"

"Nah, this is my second year."

"Beats me why a sophomore would hang out with Dylan Spurlock."

"Be gentle," said Dylan. "You know I'm fragile."

Eddy took a seat in front of the silent girl, who was unpacking her lunch.

"My name's Eddy," he said, wondering if he should hold out his hand.

“I’m Crystal,” she said, unveiling a snaggletooth that nearly got caught on her lip.

It didn’t take long for Eddy to size up the new girl. Whereas anyone would consider Kaitlin attractive, Crystal wasn’t easy on the eyes. Even though there was a sparkle in her brown pupils, her body looked swollen, as if she spent most of her life forcing down Snickers. Despite her thickness, Eddy would have probably taken to her if her belly had tits to match.

Eddy was happy that Dylan and Kaitlin sat down, relieving him from talking to Crystal. When the girls unveiled their lunches, he was surprised that they packed the same grub: celery and mini-carrots with a Coke Zero. Even though he didn’t care much about what Crystal would think, he was too embarrassed to pull out his PBJ and Cheetos – a Josie Funderburke special – in front of Dylan and Kaitlin. After all, she’d packed it in a rectangular Wet Wipes container that still reeked of aloe.

“How you know Dylan?” said Kaitlin.

“We grew up together, been friends for a while,” said Eddy.

“We used to date.”

“What happened?” said Eddy, immediately worrying that he had said something wrong.

“Ask him,” said Kaitlin, trying to stick a mini carrot in Dylan’s ear.

“Lay off me girl,” said Dylan, raring his hand back as if he would slap her.

Crystal nearly spewed her Coke Zero, her first sign of life.

“Looks like she can take you,” said Eddy.

"You know you want it," said Dylan, wrapping his arm around Kaitlin. "We should get together sometime."

"Whatcha have in mind?" said Kaitlin, her pale cheeks starting to blush.

"The movies," said Dylan. "Maybe the mall?"

"Gonna have your mom pick us up?"

"Fuck off," said Dylan, backing away. "We'll come up with somethin."

Eddy looked over at Crystal, trying to read her thoughts. He hoped that she wasn't sizing him up as double-date material. Despite it all, he couldn't help staring at her hair and lips, throbbing in the sun.

"Me and Eddy got some business to take care of," said Dylan, rising from the table. "Much love, ladies."

"Call me sometime," said Kaitlin.

"It was nice meetin y'all," said Eddy, looking directly at Kaitlin, unable to glance over at her friend.

As the boys walked away, Eddy couldn't believe that Crystal was the potential fuck interest that Dylan had in mind. Neither opened their mouth until they turned a corner.

"We're gonna get you *laid*," said Dylan, pounding his fists into Eddy's chest.

"You tryin to set me up with that meat freak?"

"Take either one. I don't give a shit."

"But you used to go out with Kaitlin."

"She ain't my bitch," said Dylan. "We just fucked."

"Why don't you tell her that?"

"You don't want in on some Crystal?"

"She's a lot of woman," said Eddy, looking around to make sure Crystal wasn't nearby.

"Kaitlin says she'll put out. Might be a good first notch."

“Look boss, I got some biznass for that bathroom,” said Eddy, thinking about eating his lunch in the stalls before the bell rang.

They smacked their hands together, making their fingers snap as they pulled away.

“Get your deuce on, Funderburke.”

As he walked away, Eddy wanted to shout something back at him, but he saw a teacher in the distance. Walking on, he thought back to Kaitlin, wishing that he had a chance with someone who looked even more radiant than Amber. Despite Dylan’s openness, he knew he shouldn’t try to wedge his way in. *Bros before hoes*, Dylan had once told him. Nothing was worth jeopardizing their friendship.

CHAPTER 17

By the end of the first week of school, Eddy accepted that all of his classes sucked. Once again, he didn't place in any of the advanced courses, the lurking grounds for the popular kids. In nearly every subject from Algebra II to French, he was sandwiched by jocks and the drug crowd, with some rednecks sprinkled in for zest.

Among the hicks was Dylan's older brother Will. Despite the fact that they were once bestfriends, Eddy felt like he had little in common with him anymore, except for Bunkum Creek Church and – of course – a certain Dylan Spurlock. Even though Will sat beside Eddy in American History, they rarely spoke to one another. Eddy wouldn't have it any other way, as he wanted to maintain his cool image.

Beyond lunch with Dylan and the ladies, English II seemed like the only thing worth a damn that Robert F. Williams High offered. Granted, he would have preferred spending all day with *Tetris* and the violin, but English II provided some worthwhile distraction.

The teacher – Mr. Grimmler – didn't care much for textbooks, standardized tests, or anything promoted by the Roughedge County Board of Education. He photocopied all of the readings himself, never letting anyone take home his spiral-bound monstrosities. Collectively called *Forbidden Truth*, each edition contained writings by everyone from Henry Miller to the Marquis de Sade, balanced with some bits from the *Necronomicon*.

"If you tell your parents about this, I'll make you eat Cakes of Light," said Mr. Grimmler, passing out his hot-pink sacred texts.

Even though people joked around about Mr. Grimmler outside of class, it seemed that students took him seriously, as nothing appeared to get back to the Roughedge County superintendent. But Eddy thought the administrators themselves might be too afraid to do anything about the man in black. He never considered that there just wasn't enough teachers around.

Mr. Grimmler's macabre leanings didn't keep him from developing a fondness for the junior varsity cheerleading squad. Whenever they wore their outfits to class, he invited them to sit in the rows closest to his desk.

"It yields an unobstructed view," he would say, allowing his rigid face to wither into a smile as his eyes worked to untangle crossed legs.

None of this bothered Eddy. He thrived off Mr. Grimmler's indulgent monologues, where he would talk about his former life in Europe. He claimed he was once the leader of a famous writing workshop, where he would give advice – and tantric instruction – to Anne Sexton wannabees. Even now, he couldn't stop boasting of his independent imprint, which everyone knew operated out of the Staples close to Fecalton Mall.

"If you're lucky, I may elect to publish some of your craft," he would tell students, stroking his chin before the chalkboard.

Despite the theatrics, Eddy ate up the curriculum. When the readings weren't making him stiff, they helped him question the religious mumbo-jumbo that weighed him down like a lead vest. And even though the violin still provided the most direct outlet for his feelings, he loved how the writing assignments allowed him to focus his thoughts. Mr. Grimmler graded his students solely on the freewriting he orchestrated each class, offering some random morsel for his kids to digest. In the first week, he spun out such themes as "Yog-Sothoth drag race," "Oreo soul grinder," and "kill Captain Crocodile." Even though Eddy didn't expect Mr. Grimmler to like his work enough to publish, he figured it would score at least a B-.

The in-class writings trickled into Eddy's at-home journaling ritual. But he'd never bring the things he wrote at home into class, fearing that they could get him expelled. Even though he knew that they were simple dreams and hazy reflections, he loved the thrill of exploring them on paper, letting his imagination transform the raw materials of reality into impossible combinations. Sometimes he was frightened

by what emerged. Without fail, the messages always made his brain catch on fire, sending sleep just right out of reach. Sometimes all was reset by a goodnight kiss from Josie, so long as the timing was just right.

September 10

Sixteen year old aughta been marching down Main Street where the courthouse look down on everybody like a big frog. Two fuckers drive by with a crossbow, ain't got no crack. Paper say the bolt was sticking out of her chest, kept going till the sun came up. Used to practice with a scarecrow holdin a watermelon, but they gonna lock one of em up for life. Ain't no tellin about the one that talked.

Wild cow still loose in the amphitheater.

CHAPTER 18

A few weeks into the school year, Josie announced that Professor Sneed – whom she now regularly called "my beau" – would be over for dinner. Up to now, she had shielded her son from his stepfather-in-waiting, but Eddy overheard enough to know that the couple often saw one another, especially whenever he crashed at Dylan's. He hated the idea of his mother touching strange flesh – meaning anything outside of family and Southern Pride Rest Home. And despite Josie's praises about Roughedge County's newest intellectual, Eddy wasn't excited to meet his mother's lover.

On the big day, Josie was busy in the kitchen by the time Eddy got home. Bags of frozen vegetables, boxes of Stove Top stuffing, and raw chicken pieces littered the countertops.

Eddy also noticed a saucer full of eggs, all beaten together in fatty milk.

"You best get in the shower," said Josie, mixing together some chicken batter in a Ziploc bag. "Better come out with your bells shining."

"Don't tell me I gotta get all dressed up."

"Nothin less than your Sunday best. Ain't every day you get to have dinner with *the* Professor of Southern Studies."

Eddy decided the battle wasn't worth fighting, unless she made him wear the clip-on tie that he'd inherited from Gabe. But it took all his might not to pick up the violin, knowing that Josie would chase him into the bathtub if she heard "Jesus Christ Superstar" instead of running water.

Showered and dressed, Eddy walked back into the kitchen. While he was away, Josie had put on a shiny gold shirt, buttoned low enough to give a little peek. Just like before church, Kleenex were stuck in her collars – make-up shields for the foundation she always slathered across her neck. Ever since they were toddlers, Eddy and Gabe always had to be on the lookout, making sure that Josie didn't strut into church with tissues exploding out of her neck.

"Don't forget about the Kleenex," said Eddy, trying to get a glimpse of her bra.

"Remind me later, little man. Got a lot of cookin to do before I yank 'em out."

Eddy looked over at the deep fryer, filled with Wesson oil on hi-heat. He watched her dip a battered piece of chicken into the cauldron, careful not to splash grease on her blouse.

"He'll be here in less than five minutes," said Josie. "You better dump out them vegetables and do somethin with that rice."

Eddy opened the blistering bags, squeezing rice back into the pot. While dumping green peas into a colander, he heard someone yanking on the screen door.

"Get rid of the Kleenex!"

Josie jerked them out and tossed them away as she shimmied towards the back door.

"Well if it ain't Doctor Stu!"

"How's my darling?"

Eddy felt his stomach churn as Josie answered with a kiss. He'd never seen his mother in love.

"So this must be the 8th wonder?" said Stu, once he removed his paws from Josie's waist.

Eddy stuck out his hand, warm and sticky from the steam.

"Je m'appelle Eddy."

"Est-ce que tu parle français?"

"What?" said Eddy, jerking back his hand.

"Sounded like you know your French."

"Just started," said Eddy, looking back towards the kitchen counter, where fried chicken sweated grease onto a pile of paper bags.

"Can I offer you somethin to drink?" said Josie.

"What do you have?"

"Got tea, Juicy Juice, Sunny Delight."

"No soda?"

"You mean a soft drink?" said Josie, flashing a flirty smile. "If you ask kindly, Eddy might let you have some Mountain Dew."

"I'll just take water, thank you."

"Can you handle that, little man?"

"Sure thing, ye olde woman."

Eddy wondered if she had heard him as he shoved a glass into the refrigerator port. While ice tumbled out of the black hole, he looked over at Stu, who stroked Josie as if she were a cat.

With his sportcoat and jeans combo, Stu wasn't much for fashion. Eddy thought his mother could do better than a stubby man whose eyes were too far apart. It didn't help that he had two mops of hair dripping out of his nostrils. Sizing him up, Eddy figured that he had at least a couple of decades on Josie.

"Please sit down," said Josie, pulling out a plastic chair for her man.

Eddy handed off the water, palming the rim of the glass.

"Are you sure my services are not needed in the kitchen?"

"Everything's ready, Professor. You want white or dark meat?"

"I take it this is Josie Funderburke's celebrated fried chicken?"

"Nothin less than the best."

"Give me whatever you think is finest."

"I'll take the breasts," said Eddy, immediately realizing – courtesy of Josie's stare – that he should have kept his opinions to himself.

"The guest gets first pick, little man."

"Let him eat breasts," said Stu, smiling at his lover. "You know I'm more of a leg and thigh man anyway."

After giving her man a wink, Josie dished out three plates, all with equal portions of green peas, corn, rice, and stuffing, along with a few pieces of chicken. Even though Eddy scored both breasts – barely leaving enough room on his plate to fart

ketchup from a squeeze bottle – he was jealous that Stu got a bit more chicken than everyone else.

"Your mother tells me you're quite a whiz at the violin," said Stu, using a knife and fork on his chicken.

"Runs in the family," said Eddy, chewing on a ketchup-drenched wad of skin.

"You never told me," said Stu, raising a paper towel to his face as he looked over at Josie.

"Don't listen to him. He's just blabbin."

"You don't need to hide it from him, Mom."

"Whatchu talkin about, little man?"

"Is that a kitty I hear?"

Eddy looked over at Stu who seemed clueless, scooping a bite of corn onto his spoon.

"We ain't got no cats," said Josie, giving her son a look that persuaded him to back off.

"I was just talking about Catherine the Great."

"What do you mean, young man?" said Stu, blotting the corners of his mouth with a paper towel.

"She didn't tell you we're Russian?"

"Never," said Stu, resting his hands in his lap.

"Eddy's just runnin his mouth," said Josie. "Pay him no mind."

"He ain't never heard about my great-great-grandfather?"

"Who you talkin about now?"

"Bosepheuskoff McCoyski."

"My son's such a joker," said Josie, sending Eddy a stiff blow underneath the table.

"I've never heard of Russians settling in this part of the south."

“We ain’t the least bit Russian,” said Josie. “We God-fearing folk, Scotch-Irish with a bit of English thrown in. I’ll be danged if we come from a bunch of heathens.”

“Actually, Christianity was a major part of Russian life until the Revolution.”

“And then they all turned Communist and might as well have been worshipping Satan with all that red and mess.”

“You’re such a charming lass,” said Stu, petting Josie on the shoulder.

“I can tell you things about her you don’t know,” said Eddy.

“Go to your room, Eddy Funderburke.”

“But I ain’t even finished dinner.”

“You can go to bed hungry for all I care.”

“Don’t treat me like some little kid.”

“You sure as heck acting like one.”

“Let the child stay,” said Stu, touching Josie’s hand. “We’ve hardly had a chance to learn about one another.”

“I ain’t no child,” said Eddy, crossing his arms.

“Don’t talk back to our guest,” said Josie, sighing as she turned to Stu. “I’m sorry about all this.”

“Let’s just start again,” said Stu, stretching his arms before him. “Josie tells me you’re quite a virtuoso.”

“Can I be excused?”

“He’s usually not like this,” said Josie, looking over at her lover.

“Your son is certainly more refined than most of my students.”

Eddy smiled against his will. Even though he’d heard about people going to college after graduating Robert F. Williams High, it never seemed like a possibility for a

Funderburke. He saw college the same way he viewed the symphony, something that only people of a certain pedigree could enjoy, like champagne and Persian cats.

"You really think I'm better than them?"

"I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it."

"Do you think I could go to college one day?"

"I hope so. You might even be able to receive a scholarship to Piedmont."

"Really?"

"Anything is possible, right Josie?"

"So long as you work hard and put everything into God's hands."

After clearing away the plates, Josie unveiled a sweet potato pie that she'd made the night before. She cut it into six wedges, leaving faint lines in the tin pan. As everyone dug into the gooey slices, Eddy thought about asking if he might have a chance at attending Julliard, one of his old dreams. But he decided to remain silent, afraid of the professor's answer.

CHAPTER 19

After school, Eddy stayed on the bus to ride over to the Spurlocks. Earlier in the day, Dylan had bought some liquor off Zachary Fowler, a loner who had just transferred to Robert F. Williams High from some school in Charlotte. Besides that, no one knew much about him, except the day when Mr. Tyson found him passed out in the bathroom. People said that he went into a coma after drinking so much Robitussin that he shit himself cherry red. Ever since, people just called him Robo Rob.

"I don't give a fuck who he is," said Dylan. "The man got us a pint of Old Crow."

"My mom would kick my butt if she saw me with him."

"Dude's got a sweet-ass Lexus *and* he's a hook up. We gotta go rollin with him sometime."

Eddy didn't think much about Dylan's proposition after they got off the bus. Not wasting a minute, they snatched a two-liter of Mountain Dew and a large Burger King cup out of the kitchen. Even though Dylan's parents weren't home – and Will was hanging out with Chief from youth group – they headed to the backwoods hideout to avoid any surprises.

Walking down the trail, Eddy noticed that a few leaves had begun to change. Even though it was getting dark a little earlier these days, they had a few hours left to get their buzz on.

When they sat down at their spot, Dylan unloaded the pint into the plastic cup, topping it off with nearly all the Mountain Dew. The cup was so big that they had to use both hands to handle it.

"We need a two foot straw for this fucker," said Dylan.

"Heard that."

Before long, Eddy could feel the alcohol warming up his legs. He'd never experienced a brown liquor drunk, which Dylan told him was right for the cold months. As the warmth spread throughout his bones, he felt like squatting on the ground forever. Violin practice, *Tetris*, Professor Sneed – none of it seemed to matter.

"So when you gonna fuck Crystal Deviney?" said Dylan.

"Whatchu talkin about?"

"She's all into your ass," said Dylan, tossing the liquor bottle deep into the woods. "I saw what she pulled at lunch."

"It's just a stupid note."

"Probably said she loves you or some shit."

"She just wants to meet up at the movies," said Eddy. "Gave me her digits."

"That ass is *yours*," said Dylan, picking up a stick off the ground. "You gotta take a stab at it."

"Ain't no way I'm touchin that thang."

"I dare ya."

"How'd I even meet up with her?"

"Just tell your mom you're hangin out with me or something. It'll work."

"But there's still the fuggly factor. Ain't no way around that."

"You better make sure that movie theater's real dark. That's all I got to say."

"Girl look like she got a disease."

"I don't give a fuck what she has. She still your best shot at bustin a nut."

"Thanks."

"Listen to me, Eddy. Everybody's got to fuck a few times before they get it right. Look at it like training wheels or somethin."

"You crazy."

"I'm just sayin you best be ready when the next Amber Abernathy comes along. And you don't want to blow your load while she's fumblin with your zipper."

"Whatcha gonna give me if I do it?"

"You expect a handjob or something?" said Dylan. "Quit dicking around and get on that."

"Let me sleep on it."

"There ain't nothin to question here. It's pussy on a platter."

"With crooked teeth."

“You either fuck it or you’re gay,” said Dylan, crossing his arms. “That’s all there is to it.”

“I ain’t no fag.”

“So fuck it then!”

“Alright,” said Eddy, taking the last hit of Old Crow and Mountain Dew. “I’ll do it. I’ll fuckin do it.”

“That’s my brotha,” said Dylan, punching Eddy in the shoulder. “Now how you gonna work it?”

“I’ll sex her like a brass monkey.”

CHAPTER 20

Eddy didn't dare tell Josie about his upcoming date with Crystal. Even if he acted a bit disinterested around Dylan, he truly didn't want to blow his first opportunity to make it with a real woman. And if he told Josie about it, he was afraid she'd put a stop to it, going on and on about how girls would screw up his music career. He decided it would be easier just to say he'd be meeting up with Dylan at the mall.

"You awfully dressed up to see your friend," said Josie as her son came to meet her in the kitchen.

"We gonna be seen in public. Gotta bling it."

"Wish you felt that way when I take you around Charlotte."

"Mom!"

"And what's with the perfume?"

"It's D&G Masculine," said Eddy. "Gabe gave it to me before he left."

"Don't tell me you and Dylan gonna try to pick up some girls."

"Why'd you think somethin like that?"

"Sometimes you test me boy. You forget that I was once a youngin, too."

When they approached the Fecalton Mall, Eddy asked to be dropped off away from the front entrance, afraid that Crystal might blow his cover.

"Want me to wait until Dylan shows up?"

"I'm gonna meet him inside Wal-Mart."

"I was goin to pick up a few things myself," said Josie, putting the Grand Cherokee into drive.

"Drop me off here!"

"Makes more sense for us to head over to Wal-Mart."

"I don't want to be seen with you."

"What'd you say, boy?"

"Let me out!"

"If you gonna be that way, we'll just turn around right now and head on home."

"Why don't you trust me?"

"You think I shouldn't?"

"No!"

Eddy crossed his arms and waited to see where the Grand Cherokee would land. The second Josie pulled into a parking spot, he bolted out the door, even before she got out the handicapped parking tag.

"You better meet me out front at 9 o'clock, little man!"

Upon entering Wal-Mart, he sprinted by the door greeter – a frail lady he thought could pass for 90 – and cut diagonally through the women's apparel, the quickest route to the mall entrance. He almost stopped to thumb through the stockings, but he knew he better not be late. His Taco Bell watch told him that he only had two minutes to make it to the fountain. It didn't help that he was already nervous about his first date.

When he got to Lady Foot Locker, he slowed his run-walk to a normal pace, knowing that Crystal would soon be in sight. He tried to slow his breathing, but there was nothing he could do about the sweat soaking through his button-up Hilfiger. As he circled the fountain, he was somewhat relieved that she hadn't shown up.

"Hi, Eddy."

He looked up to see Crystal, more attractive than she looked at school. For a moment, he didn't notice that Kaitlin was right beside her.

"Hello," he responded, gulping air.

"How's it going?" said Kaitlin.

"Great," said Eddy, wondering why Kaitlin had come. "How y'all?"

"Fine," said Crystal, stretching her red lips.

"Look, we'll meet up later, alright?" said Kaitlin.

"See you in a bit."

Even though he was still nervous, Eddy felt relieved to be alone with Crystal. She'd dressed up for the event, wearing a tight-fitting grey shirt with a swooping neckline, along with a navy blue corduroy mini-skirt that attracted stares from a host of men. Even though Eddy knew that her clothes were too tight – exposing every bit of her muffin top – he couldn't help but find her attractive, though it was her charcoal-grey tights

– not the least translucent – that quickened his pulse. He wondered what it would feel like to rub his cheeks against the coarse nylon.

"Still on for Chick-fil-a?"

"Sure," said Crystal, flashing a snaggletooth that Eddy now found somewhat comforting.

"I guess we'll go then, if that's alright with you?"

"Would you rather go somewhere else?" said Crystal.

"No! God no, Chick-fil-a is great," said Eddy, afraid that she might suggest La Maison, the expensive Italian restaurant next to Belk.

The idea curbed his boner, making the walk to Chick-fil-a more manageable.

"What would you like?" said Eddy, looking at photoshopped pictures of chicken sandwiches and waffle fries.

"Some kind of salad."

"Garden, Chicken Caesar . . ."

"I'll take the Caesar," she said. "With a Diet Coke. Coke Zero if they got it."

Eddy got in line while Crystal grabbed an empty table. Adding up the prices, he was relieved that his meager allowance would cover the meal, but he couldn't stop thinking that he could have given the cash to Robo Rob for another bottle of liquor. He tried to shake it off as he placed his order.

At the table, Crystal ignored her salad after taking two bites, prompting Eddy to wonder how many cents she'd actually chomped down. He couldn't believe that such a porker wouldn't have brought her appetite, let alone order nothing but roughage.

Whenever she wasn't slurping down Diet Coke, Crystal rambled on about the virtues of clothes shopping. Eddy listened to her debate the pros and cons of Charlotte's shopping centers, lamenting that Fecalton Mall lacked everything from American Eagle to Wet Seal. He was happy they had clothes shopping as a common interest, even though he still dreaded to hear any reference to Abercrombie.

"So what religion are you?" said Crystal.

"Christian, I guess."

"I ain't ever heard of that. I'm Methodist."

"That's just a denomination. Christianity is the religion."

"What's a denomination?"

"It's just what kind of Christian you are. Like Presbyterians, Nazarenes, Catholics . . ."

"You ain't no Catholic, are you?"

"Nah," said Eddy. "Protestant."

"What's them like?"

"Bunch of talkin about Hell. But we don't jump the pews and speak in tongues."

"We neither."

For a moment, Eddy wondered what got them talking about religion. He figured it might have been Crystal's way of saying that she wasn't ready to lose her virginity, something Eddy hoped could happen that night if she was up for venturing out to the woods behind the Fecalton Mall.

"I'm not really that Christian though," said Eddy. "I think it's OK to get together before marriage."

"What do you mean?"

"Like it's alright to make out and stuff."

"I ain't even sure if it's OK to make out," said Crystal.

"My preacher told me that Jesus can forgive anything. You can even be a born again virgin."

"Why are we even talkin about this?"

"You the one who asked about religion."

Silent as death, Crystal looked down at her barely-touched salad. Eddy couldn't get a good read on her, but he was pretty sure that she wouldn't put out on the first date.

"Wanna walk around?"

"I guess so," said Crystal, not even looking up.

"Sorry for givin you a hard time and all that," said Eddy. "Tell you the truth, I am a Christian. I ain't even kissed a girl or nothin, not even a dog."

Crystal coughed up a smile, as if she couldn't hold it back.

"Let's blow this joint," said Eddy, tossing trash onto the tray. He tried to look away when he dumped the salad into the "Thank You" flap.

After dinner, Eddy and Crystal lapped the mall's interior, making fun of the window displays at JC Penney and other stores they considered inferior. As they strolled side-by-side, Eddy waxed on about how he wanted to make it as a popular violinist, hoping that boasting would increase his sex appeal.

"My teacher says it could land me anywhere. Might even get my own show one day in Branson."

"Where's Branson?"

"Live Music Capital, USA. Mostly country music, though."

"You like that stuff?"

"Not really," said Eddy, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I like playin showtunes, like songs from *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera*. Figure if I play my cards right, I could be the next Liberace."

"Who's that?"

"It don't matter," said Eddy, staring down at the stained carpet.

"What if that don't work out?"

"Teacher said I could always get a job in a backup band at Carowinds."

"You should work there!" said Crystal, flashing her bright brown eyes. "You could ride rollercoasters everyday."

"Thinkin about it. Maybe work on cruise ships in the winter."

"But where would you go for Christmas?"

"Probably just sun it up in the Caribbean. Might invite my family down if I can."

"Sounds like a lonely life," said Crystal, as if she were talking to herself.

"But it'd be worth it, livin the dream. Better than being some bum like my brother."

As he waited for Crystal to respond, Eddy began to doubt his ambitions. He knew that getting his own show in Branson wouldn't be an easy feat, and the prospect of living in the Ozarks didn't seem so appealing. Playing on a cruise ship didn't seem so bad, but he hated the idea of being an anonymous drone who – if lucky – might be given a shout-out by some velvet-clad sleaze.

"Wanna catch a movie with me and Kaitlin?" said Crystal, snapping him out of his trance.

"My mom's pickin me up at 9."

"Can't you call her?"

"Ain't got no cell phone," said Eddy, noticing that most stores looked ready to close. "She's probably already on her way."

“We’ll just have to do it again sometime,” said Crystal, revealing a smile.

“I can walk you over there though.”

“Sounds good to me.”

As they strolled towards the Cineplex 10, Eddy thought about grabbing her hand, but he knew it was too late to make any sort of move. Feeling his heartbeat in his throat didn’t help. Plus his palms were wet enough to moisten envelopes.

“There’s Kaitlin,” said Crystal, turning to face Eddy.

“I’ll see you at school.”

“Call me whenever you want,” said Crystal, startling Eddy with a hug.

As he walked away, Eddy tried to shun the warmth that cycled throughout his organs. He knew that Dylan would hate to hear that he actually cared about her, especially since he didn’t even get a chance to finger Crystal. Dylan always told him to never fall in love, claiming that it would only weigh you down. Eddy wanted to believe that Dylan was right, even though it went against everything that music had taught him.

CHAPTER 21

On Sunday morning, Eddy tossed the violin case into the back of the Grand Cherokee and scrunched into one of the back seats. Ever since Gabe had moved away, he'd always been able to ride in front wherever they went together, but today Professor Sneed got his spot. They were heading out to Bunkum Creek Church, where the youth group would be in charge of Sunday service.

"You gonna do just fine," said Josie, looking at him in the rearview mirror.

"That's it?" said Eddy.

"You'll be the star of the show," said Stu.

"Better be," said Eddy. "This is just the warm-up for the talent show."

"Whatchu talkin about?"

"Done signed up for it. First prize is a gift certificate to Applebee's."

"This gonna be at school?"

"Two weeks from now," said Eddy, staring at Stu's balding head. "Wanna come?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"You gonna beat the heck out of all them students," said Josie. "They ain't never heard what it's like when a Funderburke gets goin."

After they arrived at church, Eddy walked alone to the choir rehearsal room, where the kids – along with counselor Shelley Benton – assembled before facing the crowd. Amber Abernathy sobbed into Preacher Manus's handkerchief, swearing that she was going to be a big embarrassment. Will Spurlock – Bunkum Creek's preacher for a day – frantically shuffled his index cards, as if he were a gambler on meth. All this made Eddy feel more nervous until he bumped into Dylan, who was joking with Chief about taking a cut from the collection plate.

"Trust in God," said the Preacher in a last-minute huddle. "Lay all your jitters at the foot of the cross."

Violin in hand, Eddy opened the door to face the congregation. He didn't feel too edgy until he glanced over at his mother, who looked like she was about to melt onto Professor Sneed's shoulder.

Eddy cleared his throat four times, just enough to make Josie open her eyes. In the meantime, he'd gained the attention of the entire congregation. Everyone stopped talking and looked at the boy trembling before the American flag.

He shook his wrist and positioned the bow, ready to launch into the song. Even though his bow bounced against the strings like a flea, the noise was nevertheless the unmistakable opening notes of "Jesus Christ Superstar."

His teacher suggested playing the song at a slower tempo, hoping it could pass for a hymn. But it was already too late. Eddy soared through the piece at full speed, turning smiles into smirks as he looked out onto the congregation.

By the time he ended the song, the youth group still hadn't come out of the rehearsal room. *Must've been the tempo* he realized, knowing that he had played it slower during last night's rehearsal. He stood there holding his bow, as if he were waiting for applause. It seemed like an eternity before he heard the youth group march out in their satin robes.

While Amber Abernathy banged out the opening of "Onward Christian Soldiers," Eddy ducked out to put on his regalia. After coming back out, he took his position in the choir and looked over at Preacher Manus, who was sitting in the pews beside his wife. As the preacher's voice boomed during the chorus, Eddy couldn't stop staring at the pouches of fat trembling beneath his jaw.

He was amazed by how smoothly the service unfolded, as Will Spurlock led the crowd through liturgy and creeds. But after Will blessed the offering and walked back to the pulpit, he looked like he had a bad case of the shakes. He ran his fingers through his muddled hair, pushing the perspiration away from his brow. Sweat soaked through the pits of his bleached-out shirt, revealing the outlines of a nasty wifebeater.

"Brothers and Sisters of Bunkum Creek Church," said Will, trying to steady himself against the pulpit. "It gives me

great honor to speak before so many of you that have nurtured me throughout the years. I would also like to thank the great Preacher Manus for giving me this opportunity."

Eddy noticed that Will didn't have his index cards out.

"I am proud to report that the Lord gave me the call to faith. I gotta Bible verse about it here somewhere."

Will searched his pockets but came up empty.

"The verse goes something like this – If you have faith in me, you shall not perish but have everlasting life. And that's what I want to talk to you about today. You see, God is like an old pickup truck."

Eddy glanced at the congregation, where most faces looked caught between laughter and confusion.

"If you gotta old pickup truck like Chief, you gotta have a lot of faith in it. Faith's gonna get you where you want to go, just like if you put your trust in God."

Will couldn't stop trembling, making Eddy wonder if he could still go on.

"And if that pickup breaks down, you gotta have faith that you can fix it. Cause you can't go nowhere without a good truck. And no one can go far if they don't believe in the healing power of Jesus."

Will looked down at the carpet, as if he were trying to gain force.

"The Holy Spirit is like a carburetor. And Jesus' like the gasoline. When you put God into your life, it's like nitrous. You'll outrun everybody so long as you have faith. And that old pickup truck will become a majestic stallion!"

After taking a deep breath, Will looked up to the ceiling, as if his lost notecards were pasted just above the stained glass windows.

"I'm sorry," said Will, his face collapsing into the gigantic Bible on the pulpit, as if he were trying to eat the word of God.

Preacher Manus rose from his pew and rushed towards Will.

"This child did something that took a lot of courage," said Preacher Manus, cradling Will like a wounded warrior. "There's not many youth in today's world who would take on such a challenge. I think this young man deserves a hand."

As if someone had flicked on a neon sign that read "Applause," the congregation gave off a steady rumble, likely fueled more by obligation than enthusiasm. Eddy looked over at Dylan who had his head lowered. Eventually, Dylan shot him a smile, but Eddy knew everything wasn't right with his bestfriend.

Amber scrambled to the piano and cued the choir for the final hymn. As Dylan stood in silence, Eddy simply mouthed the words to "Trust and Obey," hoping that Josie and everyone else wouldn't notice that he refused to sing along.

After service, Josie fixed up another fried chicken dinner for lunch. But this time, Eddy was allowed to play *Tetris* while Josie and Professor Sneed worked the deep fryer. Even after they ate, Josie let Eddy excuse himself to ride his bike. He thought about heading over towards the Spurlocks, but he figured that Dylan wouldn't be back from having lunch at his grandmother's house.

It didn't take long for Eddy to get bored with riding around. He figured it'd be best to get in more *Tetris* time, along with some violin practice. To date, he'd mastered about half of the Andrew Lloyd Webber songbook, though there were still some songs from *Starlight Express* and *Joseph and*

the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat that remained allusive. He hoped to be through it all before Christmas.

When he got home, Eddy noticed that none of the dishes had been put away. Flies circled around a basket of biscuits left out on the counter.

She shut my bedroom door, thought Eddy while looking down the hallway. He heard some faint moaning as something began hitting against the wall, building in frequency and force. Even though he was still a virgin, Eddy had seen enough on the Internet to figure out what was going on.

He crawled up to his bedroom door, careful not to make the floor squeak. Looking through a tiny hole that'd been in the door for years, he saw something he had only witnessed in dreams. His mother's legs were cocked in the air like crooked fence posts on his Spongebob Squarepants comforter. And there was the Professor, pounding away with a v-neck t-shirt clinging close to his belly, his black socks stretched over bloated calves. Eddy quickly looked back at his mother, studying how her body moved like the ocean, as each thrust rippled through her body. Her boobs looked like jellyfish drifting in the sea.

Not wanting to get caught, Eddy crawled back out the door and hopped on his bike. As he peddled towards the open road, he couldn't believe that his mother was engaging in what he'd been taught was the ultimate sin – premarital sex.

CHAPTER 22

Eddy had to wait nearly a half hour until Dylan got home. In the meantime, he grew angry over his mother's betrayal, even though seeing her like that brought him one step closer to realizing his deepest fantasies. He wanted to unload his thoughts onto Dylan, but he knew the last thing he needed was to let his bestfriend to think that Mrs. Funderburke was nothing short of the Whore of Babylon.

"I need a drink," said Eddy, once the boys squirmed away from the other Spurlocks.

"Sounds good to me."

"Where can we go?"

"Let's give Robo Rob a call," said Dylan. "He'll hook us up."

After Dylan dialed their connection, Eddy soon learned that Robo Rob was in short supply. But he volunteered to swing by in his Lexus to see if they could score something in town.

When he arrived, Robo Rob barely acknowledged the dynamic duo, his face as stoic as a hearse driver. There wasn't much lively about the boney boy except for his red hair, which some joked was the result of too much Robitussin. But Eddy knew that it was all natural, judging from the few freckles on his face. Besides that, Robo Rob had the complexion of a corpse.

Soon the boys learned that they would be heading over to some woman's apartment down around "the ghetto Winn-Dixie," as everyone in Roughedge County seemed to call it. Even Josie had given up shopping there years ago.

"That's where Chantelle lives," Robo Rob said coldly, as if reciting his cholesterol levels.

Eddy instantly knew who he was talking about. In recent weeks, word had gotten around school about a crack whore who liked to buy liquor for young bucks. But Eddy couldn't believe that she was actually real.

"She'll suck your pecker for rock?" said Dylan.

"Just give her enough to cover a pint of Two Fingers, and she'll get you whatever you want."

"No bullshit?"

"It's clean," said Robo Rob. "Some people go back to her place to chill. I go home and drink in front of the plasma."

"Heard that."

When they pulled up to Chantelle's complex, Eddy noticed that someone must have taken a bat to the Brookshire Apartments sign, as the tin flaunted a major dent. Some of the

vinyl siding had been painted over with a different shade of tan, a half-assed attempt to cover up the graffiti. And when they stepped out of the car, all the apartments – as if on cue – unleashed howls, as if wild dogs were about to bust through the doors.

Naturally, Eddy was a bit on edge, even though the sight made him forget about what compelled him to search for booze. While he was excited about meeting a true-life whore, Eddy walked in Robo Rob's shadows, keeping his head down as they approached the front door.

"What the hell you want?"

"It's just Zachary and a couple friends, Chantelle. They're cool."

"Better be," said the scratchy voice behind the door.

Eddy could hear someone fumbling with the chains. He thought about turning around, but he knew it was too late. As she finally unlatched the door, he was greeted by a swollen face, scowling at the strangers. But after she looked over Dylan and Eddy, she smiled and wrapped her arms around Robo Rob.

"My lovely little man," said Chantelle, rubbing her fingers across his back.

Eddy was surprised to find her wearing a leopard-print cami with matching boy shorts, accented in black lace. Her cheeks hung like chops on her face, adorned with heavy mascara and cherry-red lipstick. Rolls of flab squeezed out of her waistline. It didn't take long for Eddy to figure out that this wasn't a good fuck option.

"And who do we have here?" said Chantelle, opening her eyes to the boys behind Robo Rob.

"My name's Dylan. And this here's Eddy."

"A pleasure to meet you both," said Chantelle, giving a little curtsy. "Feel free to enter, as long as you treat my palace with respect."

"Yes ma'am," said Eddy, sauntering into the doorway.

He couldn't believe what he found inside. Incense sticks tried to mask the odor of what must have been rotting food. Pale lights – softened by busted lampshades – revealed deep stains in the carpet, as if a few people had passed out and pissed on the floor. A girl who couldn't have been older than twelve lay across the couch, trying to sketch a still-life of cigarette butts, beer cans, and whippits. Someone had tattooed "WHITE TRASH" across her fingers.

"Now who are you again?" said Chantelle, grabbing Eddy by the cheek. "Such a cute little thang."

"My name's Eddy," he said, as she unleashed a cackle.

"Let me give you a hug, my tortured child."

He thought her hair smelled like an ashtray.

"Can you buy us some liquor?" said Robo Rob.

"Why do I let in such awful boys?" said Chantelle, painting a befuddled look on her face.

"Cause they get you fucked up," said the girl on the couch, never removing her eyes from the still-life.

After Robo Rob nodded his head, Eddy whipped out enough cash for a half-gallon of Old Crow and a pint of Two Fingers, Chantelle's request. She made everyone come along for the liquor run, insisting that she couldn't leave the boys alone with her daughter.

After a few drinks, Eddy began to feel at home in the apartment, even though she insisted upon listening to the same B-52's CD all night. She would occasionally get up to dance with the boys, shaking her body violently as she

stumbled across the carpet. The opening wails of "Planet Claire" sounded like release valves for some crazed machine.

Eddy's attention would often drift towards a makeshift altar above the fireplace. Between dried flowers, herbs, and candle stubs, she had placed a dusty Pee-Wee Herman doll, which smiled upon the carnival. Behind it all was a sheet of red cardboard where she had painted large white fangs.

"I was a vampire in my past life," she explained, drawing back her lips to unleash a ferocious screech.

Propping himself against the wall, Eddy felt as if he were sinking into the plaster. For the first time he could recall, he felt he'd finally made it, even though all this was far from Carnegie Hall.

A loud knock at the door snapped him out of his reverie.

"It's the cops!" said Dylan.

"Shut up!" said Chantelle, unlatching the chains.

When Chantelle cracked the door, the stranger forced it open, nearly knocking her onto the carpet. His grim face – along with his prosthetic arm – suggested that he was born of some wicked factory, where he had spent years in unremitting labor. His blue eyes – reminiscent of fresh steel – peered down upon the scene. A snarled lip revealed his judgment.

"Get in the bed," he commanded, looking straight at Chantelle. "You know what's comin."

As Chantelle stumbled into the bedroom, her boobs nearly spilled out of her leopard-print tank. The stranger surveyed the living room once more before slamming the door behind him.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," said Dylan.

"It's cool," said Robo Rob. "They don't mind."

Before long, Chantelle screamed inside the bedroom.

“Don’t do it,” she begged, followed by a fierce slap that sounded throughout the apartment.

Eddy feared that the stranger would break through the bedroom, smashing everything in sight with his metal claw. But he looked over to Chantelle’s daughter, who didn’t seem a bit concerned.

“She likes it,” she said, twirling bubble gum around her finger. “It’s the only way she gets off.”

Eddy exhaled as he looked towards Dylan, who revealed a slinky smile.

September 26

Most of the time mom's in that seethrough outfit where you'd see them lacy nipples smeared out like bubble gum. I could reach right under and it'd be wet as a water spicket. She say we couldn't do it cause Gabe'd be home before we knew it. Then I'd hear that Camaro creeping like a motherfucker, but it'd always make me wake up.

I know she wants me to go in there while she's sleeping. Put it wherever it'll fit, wake her up with it.

I live outback from right and wrong where nobody can find me.

CHAPTER 23

Later in the week, Crystal slipped Eddy a note suggesting that she wanted a boyfriend. He wondered if she was referring to him. After all, she didn't write anything as a bold as "Do you like me?" with the standard "Yes," "No," and "Maybe" boxes to mark before returning to sender. And during lunch, Crystal and Kaitlin often talked about all the boys that they thought were cute, making Eddy roll his eyes and occasionally whimper off to the bathroom. He figured he couldn't compete.

But in the letter, Crystal had also invited him out for another night at the Fecalton Mall, which Eddy took to be a promising sign. While thinking it over, he figured out some of the benefits of having a girlfriend – having access to a female

body, in particular. And even though Dylan had warned him against going steady, Eddy knew that it might be his best shot at getting laid. If nothing else, he figured it would be a nice way to get back at his mother, who wouldn't shut up about her romance with Professor Stu Sneed.

On Friday, Josie dropped Eddy off at the mall. Once again, he lied to his mother, saying that he would be watching a new flick with Dylan. And in the event that Eddy's rendezvous with Crystal erupted into a makeout session around the dumpsters behind the mall – leaving the couple movieless for the evening – Eddy had memorized reviews of every film showing at Cineplex 10, just in case his mother tried to quiz him.

Planning to catch the 7 o'clock showing, Crystal and Eddy had a little time to play with. Neither claimed to be hungry.

"Wanna try on clothes at Belk?" said Crystal.

"I thought you hated that store."

"But they just started carrying Juicy."

"Whatever," said Eddy, wishing he had enough courage to suggest making out instead.

He followed Crystal over to the Juniors section, stopping beneath a fuchsia sign that read "Juicy Couture." She began flipping through some dresses that Eddy knew were out of her price range.

"You can't even try those on," said Eddy. "See that big cable?"

"All you have to do is ask."

"But you ain't gonna buy nothin."

"They don't know that."

"Let's just look at the pants or somethin."

“Whatever,” said Crystal, huffing as she walked towards the racks in the rear.

While she picked out some items, Eddy checked out the tights display. He fondled some purple fishnets, trying to imagine how Crystal would look in them.

“What are you doing over there?”

“Just checkin it out,” said Eddy, feeling his cheeks swell.

“I need your help.”

Eddy walked around to find her holding a pair of periwinkle pants against her waist.

“You think these will be too small?”

“Naw,” said Eddy, thinking back to times when he served as Josie’s personal shopper.

“Let’s try ‘em on.”

“Will they let me in there?”

“Don’t be silly, Eddy Funderburke.”

While Crystal went back into the dressing room, Eddy took a seat on a bench. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t stop thinking about the Abercrombie incident. He wondered if he’d ever feel comfortable trying on clothes again.

Eddy was still staring into the carpet when Crystal came out of the dressing room. The low-rider pants clung to her hips, spitting out a gob of flesh that rolled over the waistband. Her stretched-out tank top didn’t help matters.

“They ain’t too tight, are they?”

“Just pull ‘em up a bit.”

Eddy had picked up this trick from watching Josie stuff her gurch into pants that were too discounted to refuse. But when Crystal tried it out, her crotch turned into a blue taco.

“Is that better?” asked Crystal

"Hot," said Eddy, thinking with the wrong head.

"You sure they ain't too tight?"

"I'd say they're just right," said Eddy, captivated by cameltoe.

"Should I buy them?"

"How?"

"My mom, silly."

"I wouldn't be against it," said Eddy, knowing his dick would stick out like a giraffe if she made him get up.

"You don't really like them."

"Yes I do! They're great!"

"OK," said Crystal as she spun around like a swollen cheerleader and bolted back into the dressing room.

To curb his erection, Eddy began thinking about the fetal pig dissection he had to do in Biology. Everything went fine until Chad Trueblood – one of the most notorious dorks at Robert F. Williams High – decided to eat a couple of gall bladders. Other boys began tossing intestines onto the girls, making them dangle across their hair and face. After someone threw a scalpel against the chalkboard, the teacher had to call in the police. But that didn't stop Angelico Rape from shoving a pig head down the back of Eddy's favorite shirt.

As they walked towards the Cineplex 10, Eddy shook off the fetal pig flashbacks, trying to fathom ways to convince Crystal to makeout, rather than spending hard cash for a film.

"Are you sure you want to see a movie?"

"What's wrong?"

"I ain't really into them. My mom usually only lets me watch something if it's G-rated."

"I *love* Disney films," said Crystal, turning the face her date. "Let's see *Hanoi Hamster*!"

"Alright," said Eddy, wishing he could be more persistent.

After purchasing the tickets, Eddy cringed as they walked past the snack bar. He knew he didn't even have enough for a big ass Mountain Dew.

"The prices are crazy," said Crystal, as she looked over at the Sour Patch Kids.

"Ain't that the truth," said Eddy, taking a deep breath. "People got to be stupid to buy somethin here."

Crystal picked out some seats on the back row, which Eddy took to be a good sign, even though they were sandwiched between teenage couples from other high schools. After the previews, Eddy wanted to reach across the armrest to take her hand, but he couldn't garner courage. Then he remembered to fake a yawn and drape his arm across her shoulder. But he overextended his reach and tapped the guy beside Crystal.

"What the fuck?" said the stranger, jerking away.

Eddy decided to retreat for a while and plan his next attack. On thing was certain – he didn't give a damn about *Hanoi Hamster*. After all, he already knew the plot – a troop of fuzzy-wuzzies swarm modern-day Vietnam to liberate turkeys from Pho Ni, a wicked skunk dictator. After the Mammal Brigade captures the evil leader, reptile terrorists wake up from a 40-year slumber in the Hanoi Hilton. During the climactic battle, Ham Singletary – the rodent general – infiltrates the sleeper cell using a turkey baster and nasal spray, making the world safe for Ben & Jerry's, Rockstar Energy Drink, and ShamWow.

With the finale coming up, Eddy knew he had to make his move. He finally found enough courage to reach over the armrest, latching onto Crystal's wrist. He stroked it with his

thumb until she grabbed his fingers. While the Mammal Brigade was busy saving the world, Crystal leaned over and kissed him. Seizing the opportunity, Eddy thrust his tongue between her teeth, moving his lips like a hungry machine. She squeezed his hand, taking deep breaths through her nostrils. Opening his eyes and pulling away, he saw her smile. He felt relieved, as if he had made it to the 78th level of *Tetris*.

After the movie, Crystal held his hand as they walked back into the mall. Eddy was afraid of bumping into his mother, even though she wasn't supposed to show up until the mall closed.

"Wanna get some Cold Stone?"

"I think I'm broke," said Eddy, hoping she didn't remember the change left over from the movie tickets.

"This one's on me."

Inside the store, Eddy spent nearly five minutes figuring out the best concoction: cake batter ice cream with Butterfinger, devil's food cake, Gummi Bears, and cherry pie filling. After he placed his order, he felt bad for holding out on Crystal, figuring that he had at least enough to cover his share of the cost.

"Here's a little," said Eddy, handing over a folded bill.

"That's so sweet," said Crystal, who slipped the cash into the tip jar.

Eddy nearly lost his breath. Bewildered, he looked over at the pimple-faced guy behind the counter, who must have been a couple years older. Even if he didn't have Gabe's muscles, ice-cream boy certainly shared his height, making Eddy look like an elf.

Once they walked back into the mall, he couldn't contain it anymore.

“I can’t believe you just gave it away like that.”

“What?”

“My hard-earned money.”

“I was just being generous.”

“Mr. Clearasil didn’t do nothin more than he was supposed to.”

“What’s your problem?” said Crystal, taking a seat on a bench.

“Do you think he’s cute or somethin?”

“No!”

As he took bites out of his Cold Stone creation, Eddy let her stew on his words. Even if he didn’t think he liked Crystal so much, he hated the thought of her talking up that guy to Kaitlin at lunch next week.

After finishing his cup, he watched Crystal devour her cone in broad licks, trying to outrace the melting nub.

“You like the movie?” said Eddy.

“It was good,” said Crystal. “I found it hard to follow though.”

“Me too,” said Eddy, trying to think of something to talk about. He looked over at Crystal, who nearly spit out her ice cream.

“You have some on your nose!” said Crystal.

Eddy wiped it off with the back of his hand, trying to laugh it off. It was the first time he felt comfortable all evening.

When Crystal finished her cone, she turned around to face Eddy. He felt intimidated by her gaze, unsure what would come next.

“I really like spending time with you.”

“Me too,” said Eddy, not even stopping to consider if his words were true.

“Remember that letter I gave you?”

“Which one?”

“Where I said I wanted a boyfriend?”

“That’s the one,” said Eddy, trying to joke around.

“I was talking about you.”

Eddy had to avoid her gaze to clear his head. As he looked down, he knew that Dylan would be ashamed if he accepted the offer. But Eddy also realized that he would never feel comfortable taking a girl outback without some quasi-legal coupling agreement. Despite his wishes, there was something within him that cared too much about Crystal.

When he looked back at her face, he felt compelled to say the one thing that would make her happy.

“You can be my boyfriend,” said Eddy.

“What!”

“We can, you know, go out.”

“You said *boyfriend*,” barked Crystal, crossing her arms. “I’m not a boy.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did!” said Crystal.

“I don’t think so.”

For a moment, Eddy didn’t care about the slipup. He just wanted to walk away, but something kept him pinned to the bench. He watch the gates come down from the ceiling, transforming stores into prison cells for the night.

As he stared at the ice-cream boy behind bars, Crystal put her index finger under Eddy’s chin, forcing him to look into her eyes.

“Yes,” said Crystal, unveiling her snaggletooth. “I’ll be your girlfriend.”

Putting his arm around her, Eddy felt something surging through his body, unfurling like white light. As they celebrated with a kiss, he tried not to worry about what his mother would think.

CHAPTER 24

The next morning, Eddy devoured his standard breakfast of microwave pancakes, Mountain Dew, and a bottle of Sudafed. These days, Eddy found it difficult to accept the way his mother looked before she poured on layers of makeup. Without foundation, she had the allure of a zombie. It didn't help that she had on a pair of Ralph Lauren shorts that Eddy had outgrown last year.

"You wouldn't believe what I did last night," said Josie, firing up a Salem.

"What?" snapped Eddy, as the Sudafed hadn't quite kicked in.

"Stu took me to a lecture at Piedmont College."

"So?"

"It was somethin! The room was filled with a bunch of bigwigs, and Stu wasn't the least bit shy about introducing me to everybody."

Eddy pretended to be more interested in an iPhone commercial, featuring an app that smoked iCigarettes for tobacco addicts in recovery.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Maybe."

"And then he took me out to La Maison, that fancy Italian joint in the Fecalton Mall."

Eddy nearly coughed up his Mountain Dew. After all, La Maison was only a few doors down from Cold Stone. He hoped his mother hadn't caught him with Crystal.

"I was at the movies then."

"Don't try to change the subject on me, little man. We'll get to that in a minute."

Eddy felt a tremor in his guts. He knew he couldn't give himself away by making a break for it, but the last thing he wanted to do was face the pain.

"As I was saying, Stu took me to La Maison and let me order anything I wanted. We even had tiramousse, which he said means 'Pick me up' in Italian. Ain't that sweet?"

Eddy couldn't contain it any longer. He knew his mother would freak out, but he figured it would be better to draw first blood rather than endure the interrogation.

"I got me a girlfriend."

"Since when?"

"Last night."

"You told me you were at the movies with Dylan."

"I was," said Eddy, immediately realizing that his mother didn't know as much as he thought. "But we bumped into some girls from school."

"You mean to say that some hussies you knew just happened to be there *and* that you came away with one who claims to love you."

"It's true!"

"Sounds to me like a bunch of horse manure."

"They're girls we know from lunch," said Eddy. "She said she's liked me for a long time."

"What's her name?"

"Crystal."

"Crystal who?"

"Deviney."

"Don't know no Devineys. You sure you ain't lying, boy?"

"I swear," said Eddy. "We was going out for ice cream and she asked me right then and there."

"Don't sound like a good girl if she's asking you out."

"You know I'm shy. Don't want girls making me play the violin all wrong. You told me that yourself."

"I ain't never said such a thing."

"You said that about Amber!"

"Things different now," said Josie, putting out her cigarette. "Stu thinks it would be a good idea if you got yourself a girlfriend."

"Who cares what he thinks," said Eddy, crossing his arms.

"Don't you talk that way about him, boy. He might end up being your daddy."

"Bosephus McCoy is the only dad I got."

"You better watch it," said Josie, popping some pills from beneath the kitchen counter. "Despite what you think, Stu wants only the best for you. Preacher Manus, too."

"What's he got to say?"

"Told me it'd help if you started seeing girls outside of church. So long as they ain't Catholic."

"Crystal don't worship Mary."

"She go to church?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well that's good enough for me," said Josie. "Hate to say it, but there ain't no girl good enough for you at Bunkum Creek Church."

"Not even Amber?"

"I never liked the idea of you gettin mixed up with them Abernathys anyway. Bunch of stuck up people that don't care about nothin but money. Might as well be Yankees."

"So you're fine about Crystal?"

"Bring her around and let me take a look. I'll tell you if she's fit for a Funderburke."

As he gobbled down the last bit of cold pancakes, Eddy couldn't believe how his mother took the confession. He was a bit let down, hoping that the news would irritate her like a ruthless case of scabies.

Feeling the food churn in his stomach, Eddy wondered if he should dump his latest acquisition. But he eventually took comfort in knowing that Crystal could take away his virginity, as the fate of eternal damnation didn't seem to concern him as much these days. After all, he had a born-again virgin card that would let him pass go. And if his mother could fuck without wearing a wedding ring, why couldn't he?

CHAPTER 25

During lunch, Dylan and Eddy would often boast about their drinking bouts. Even though the girls made fun of them at first, it didn't take long for Crystal and Kaitlin to get interested.

"You're just afraid of what Eddy does when you ain't around," said Dylan to Crystal, nudging Eddy with his elbow.

"Shut up!"

"Boy's tryin to cover something up," said Dylan, laughing.

"Only them blowjobs you get from Chantelle," said Eddy.

"What?" said Kaitlin.

"Chantelle ain't nothin but a crack whore," said Dylan.

"We got to see this place," said Crystal.

"She don't want no girls up in her apartment."

"That's what I heard," said Eddy, playing along.

"Bullcrap," said Kaitlin, popping a mini-carrot. "You already said somethin about her daughter."

"But that's her daugh-ter," said Dylan, sounding out each syllable. "How you expect to get over there anyways, walk to the ghetto Winn-Dixie?"

"Get Robo Rob to pick us up."

"You want to get with him or somethin?" said Dylan.

"Not that freak!"

"How about we just get some liquor and meet up somewhere?" said Eddy.

"Why can't we go to Chantelle's?" said Crystal.

"You don't want to be there," said Dylan. "Whatchu gonna tell your parents if the cops bust in?"

"That I was out with Dylan Spurlock," said Kaitlin.

Only a couple of days later, Robo Rob led an expedition to "The Pit," a popular turnoff where upperclassmen drank during the summer. He claimed that no one would be there during the school week, especially on such a cold day. Upon request, he had picked up a half-gallon of Old Crow, which Eddy hoped would keep the girls warm.

At the local BP, Dylan bought a two-liter of Cheerwine before the pack ventured down the dirt road. It had been raining over the past few days, but Robo Rob seemed to believe that his Lexus would pull through. Even though Eddy had his doubts, the car made it past the first mud puddles without a problem.

The road looked clear ahead, but Robo Rob stopped and got out of the car. Eddy watched as he removed the chain

blocking another turnoff. It led straight into the forest, one lane at best. Massive mud pits made the road look impossible.

"Where in the hell are we?" said Kaitlin.

"Don't question the boy when he's driving," said Dylan.

Robo Rob stared straight ahead like a deranged captain.

Leaning into Crystal, Eddy looked out the front window after Robo Rob pushed the accelerator. The car tried to get enough momentum to make it through the mud, but the tires lost their traction.

"Floor it!" said Dylan, who looked ready to grab the wheel.

Robo Rob steered frantically, trying to get the tires to catch on something. After switching from reverse to drive, the car bucked out of the mud, nearly lurching into a pine tree.

"It's just ahead," said Dylan.

"You sure about that?" said Kaitlin.

Robo Rob nodded while maneuvering the last stretch of road. The car spat out in front of a lake, where cans and busted bottles littered the beach.

"Pull up!" said Kaitlin.

"You wanna change a flat tire?" said Dylan, as Robo Rob put the car in park.

It was cold when they got out, but Eddy figured they could at least make it to sunset, just a couple hours away. With Dylan leading the way, they walked to a small cabin, all decked out with graffiti. Eddy was stunned to find a concrete floor inside.

"This is disgusting," said Kaitlin, standing at the entrance.

No one ventured in.

"Looks like someone puked over there," said Crystal, pointing at a crusty yellow stain.

“Ladies, please,” said Dylan. “We’ll just hang outside.”

“But it’s too cold,” said Kaitlin.

“Not when you get a bit of this in you,” said Dylan, holding up the Old Crow.

“Let’s go,” said Kaitlin, turning towards the car. “This stinks.”

“Just get a few drinks down,” said Dylan. “It ain’t gonna wrong you.”

“We can always hang out in the car if we need to,” said Eddy, putting his arm around Crystal.

Dylan cracked open the Old Crow and pretended to throw the cap into the lake. Only Eddy smiled.

“Y’all girls drank before?” said Dylan.

“Shut up!” said Kaitlin, as Dylan took a swig of Old Crow followed by a hit of Cheerwine. He let out a vicious burp before passing the bottles to Eddy.

“That’s how it’s done,” said Dylan.

“May I have it?” said Kaitlin, turning towards Eddy for the whisky. Her face squinted as she held the bottle to her lips.

“Chug it,” said Dylan in a deep voice, as she frantically grabbed the Cheerwine.

It didn’t take long for Kaitlin to spit it out, nearly hitting the Lexus.

“Couldn’t you at least got somethin worth a damn?”

“Ain’t a thang wrong with Old Crow,” said Dylan. “You just got to change your approach.”

“Let me try,” said Crystal, grabbing onto the whisky bottle and turning the bottom towards the sky.

“Check it out!” said Eddy, surprised that she didn’t even reach for the chaser.

After everyone had their fill, Eddy and Crystal ventured into the woods alone. As he walked, Eddy could feel the foil-wrapped condom dig into his ass cheeks. He hoped that Crystal would finally give him a reason to open it.

Once they were far away from the crew, Crystal and Eddy sat down on a freshly fallen pine, still attached to its fractured stump. The splinters were sharp and clean.

Without saying a word, Eddy grabbed onto Crystal, rubbing his hands over her coat. As they kissed, he snuck a trembling hand inside her shirt. His calluses crackled against the bra.

"Are you ready?" said Eddy, eager to pull her clothes off.

"What are you doing?"

"I thought we we're going out."

"Don't you remember what I said?"

Eddy tried to recall what he was supposed to know. The whisky didn't help.

"I'm not sure if I'm ready for this," continued Crystal.

"We're just making out."

"But Kaitlin and Dylan are over there."

"They won't mind," said Eddy. "They've already done it after all."

"Who told you that?"

"Dylan said they got it on when they used to go out."

"She'd never do that."

"You don't think?"

"I know that for a fact," said Crystal. "Don't listen to Dylan."

"Maybe we should go ask them."

"No!"

"Just kidding, sweet treat."

Eddy put his arm back around Crystal, hoping it would ease things. He could feel her trembling.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Crystal, turning away.

"You can tell me."

"I can't."

"But I'm your boyfriend," said Eddy. "You can tell me anything."

"You sure?"

"I guess."

"I want to, but I can't. I signed a card at Bible Camp that said I'd wait until marriage."

"So what's the big deal?"

"I just can't go and break a promise like that."

"They probably just filed that away somewhere. No one'll care."

"But God knows everything," said Crystal. "I ain't going to Hell for a few minutes of fun."

Eddy couldn't believe it. He thought that scoring would be easier now that they were officially an item. For a moment, the relationship felt like nothing but a trap. He realized he should have listened to Dylan.

"If things don't work out, you can be a born-again virgin."

"Don't talk that way!"

"I'm sorry," said Eddy, trying to come up with anything to please her. "We can take it slow. Ain't no thang."

"Really?"

"I guess."

"I knew you weren't like all the others," said Crystal, squeezing her boyfriend against her shoulders.

As Eddy kissed her, his thoughts began to settle on Dylan. He wanted to trust Crystal, but Eddy couldn't believe that his bestfriend also suffered from the most dreaded of all adolescent diseases – virginity. It bothered him to think that Dylan – mentor extraordinaire – might be just as clueless as any fourteen-year-old boy.

"I love you," said Crystal, coming up for air.

"Me too."

CHAPTER 26

With Eddy in the backseat of the Grand Cherokee, Josie and Professor Sneed picked up Crystal a half-hour before the Robert F. Williams High talent show. Josie was impressed that her son's girlfriend lived in Carlyle Estates, even though the Deviney home didn't live up to the development's reputation. A lot of the vinyl siding had blown off the garage, making the strips dip into the muddy yard.

But it was Crystal's parents that took Eddy by surprise. Her mother looked to be about 100 pounds overweight, even though she was barely 30 years old. Her hair was pulled back into a bun, giving an unobstructed view of her bullneck. Crystal's father stood solid as a refrigerator, his cut-up fingers

hanging like sausages. He came up to the Grand Cherokee shirtless, revealing a jagged scar across his belly.

After a little meet and greet, Josie backed out of the driveway. Releasing a deep sigh, Eddy clutched his girlfriend's hand, nervous about the performance.

"So where's your family from?" said Josie, her voice pitched higher than usual.

"My daddy grew up around Rock Hill, but my mom's from Wisconsin."

"You always grew up in that house?" said Josie.

Eddy felt she was trying to lead Crystal into some corner, proving that the girl was unworthy of her son's admiration.

"We used to have a smaller house around Big Lick Road," said Crystal. "We've been here about three years."

"It's pretty."

"Thank you," chirped Crystal, as if Josie had complemented her appearance.

"Have you heard Eddy play the violin?" said Josie, turning around to look into the backseat.

"Not yet," said Crystal.

"Eddy's gonna win this thing tonight," said Josie.

"Mom!" said Eddy, pretending to be embarrassed, even though he felt good about his chances.

"Me and Stu are just so thrilled you're gonna get up there," said Josie, her eyelashes clumped with mascara.

Eddy had rarely seen his mother so proud. He wished that Dylan would have been willing to join them there, especially since his brother Will would be presenting a stand-up routine. Despite Eddy's persistence, Dylan maintained that performing in the talent show was exclusively for dorks, and the last think he wanted to do was be a nerd by association.

Eddy's entourage walked up to the auditorium, an eyesore that was built before they integrated the schools. Even a fresh coat of paint couldn't liven up this monstrosity. The year before, Eddy had to take home an affidavit swearing that no one would sue the school for renovating the ceiling. Even though they had draped plastic sheets over the unfinished job, asbestos dust still trickled down onto the seats.

"Where does my son need to be?" said Josie, approaching an adult at the auditorium's entrance.

"Is he gonna be in the show?"

"But of course!"

"Sit on the front row," said the lady, turning to the maestro. "You'll be called when it's time."

"Thanks," said Eddy, trying to enter the auditorium as quickly as possible.

"Can't we sit together?" said Crystal, tugging on a new Hilfiger shirt that Josie had bought for the occasion.

"We'll meet up afterwards," said Eddy. "I promise."

Making his way to the front, Eddy was surprised that large families – dressed in their Sunday best – took up entire rows. Glancing at the program, Eddy discovered that nearly all the contestants were performing Gospel and R&B. As he planned to showcase songs from *Cats*, he felt a little out of place.

Halfway through the show, the audience's reactions had nearly paralyzed Eddy. They booed anything that strayed too far from *American Idol* material, whether interpretative dance or G-rated comedy. Heckling even forced a rock band to stop halfway through a song. Police had to escort the lead singer off the stage as he began shouting insults at the crowd.

Even Will wasn't spared from this humiliation. Clumsy as ever, he tried out a routine of religious-based jokes, which only riled up the audience more.

"I don't know why they called them the Three Wise Men," said Will. "After all, they only brought Jesus three gifts. Heck, I get more presents than that for Christmas, and y'all know I ain't the son of God."

It didn't take long for Will to get the gong.

Eddy was up next.

When he heard his named called, Eddy felt like he was no longer in his body. He crept up the stairs and secured a spot at the edge of the stage. Looking into the lights didn't calm his racing heart.

Even though Josie insisted that he wear cat ears during the performance, Eddy couldn't bring himself to take them out of his blazer. With a shaky hand, he raised his bow and launched into "Jellical Songs for Jellical Cats."

Like his last performance, he found himself playing too fast. But this time he just wanted to get it over with. His transition into an excerpt from "Memory" – a song that always brought tears to his mother's eyes – didn't seem to cast a spell onto the crowd.

One note misfired. Then another. As he sawed through the *Cats* melody, he could only focus on loud coughs from the audience. He wanted to close his eyes, but he was afraid it would make things worse.

Eddy even couldn't make it through the final bit of "Magical Mr. Mistoffelees," deciding to cut it before bolting off the stage. He was nearly home-free until the cat ears dropped out of his pocket.

“Looks like you forgot something,” said the principal, dangling the cat ears before the audience. “Seriously folks, let’s have a round of applause for Eddy Funderburke.”

As he returned to his chair, Eddy did his best to block out the cheers and jeers. Safe from the audience’s eye, he wanted to yell at his mother for encouraging him to wear the cat ears. He knew that he’d have hell to pay once the word got around Robert F. Williams High.

After the principal dismissed everyone, Eddy tried to find Crystal. He saw the first place winner – who had danced to a chopped and screwed version of “Rock Island Line” – squealing as she burst into her family’s arms. He turned around to see Josie and Professer Sneed standing behind him.

“Good job,” said the Professor, giving Eddy a pat on the shoulder.

“We’re very proud of you,” said Josie, hugging her son.

“Not now,” said Eddy. “I gotta find Crystal.”

Pushing his mother away, he went back into the auditorium to search for his girlfriend. It wasn’t long before he found her talking to a group of freshmen. Eddy was relieved that none of them were boys.

“You did good up there,” said Crystal, giving her boyfriend a congratulatory kiss on the cheek.

“I wasn’t even runner-up.”

“It don’t matter. I know how good you are.”

On the way home, Josie suggested they stop for ice cream at Hardee’s. Eddy reluctantly agreed, knowing that it would at least give him more time with Crystal.

“I can’t believe them blacks,” said Josie. “Jumpin around like orangutans every time one of their own got on stage.”

"Mom!" said Eddy, hoping Crystal wouldn't think he felt the same.

"You expect me just to ignore it? You know they gave first prize to that girl cause she African-American."

"Can we just not talk about it?" said Eddy.

"It was the same way with Gabe," said Josie, turning to face Professor Sneed. "He had the whole Rotary Club in tears with his speech, but the judges said the little darkie did a better job. Can you believe it?"

"You made up that speech," said Eddy.

"Don't disrespect your brother," said Josie. "He wrote every word of it."

"Can't we just drop it?" snapped Eddy.

"What's crept up your butt?"

"You really want to know?"

"Ain't got all day."

"I wish you'd never made me play popular music."

"Whatchu talkin about, little man?"

"You said there were too many slant-eyes for me to have a chance at classical music."

"I never said such a thang," said Josie, looking over at Professor Sneed.

"You told me I'd have better opportunities if I played showtunes."

"Now listen here, boy. *You* were the one who wanted to play popular music. I didn't want you to get mixed up in that mess in the first place."

"Whatever you say, Kitty."

"You better hush it right now or you'll be walkin home."

"Wish I never stopped playing classical."

“I said shut it,” shouted Josie, before turning to Professor Sneed. “I’m sorry, Stu. He ain’t usually like this.”

“Don’t you worry,” said Stu. “It’s been a pleasure being alongside the Funderburkes.”

“I’ll let you get all the pleasure you want,” said Josie, reaching over to squeeze his knee, forcing Eddy to look away.

After staring at the passing trees, Eddy turned towards Crystal, who looked as tense as a rabbit. He reached over and stroked her shoulder, hoping it would reassure her that everything’s alright.

“Don’t you go touchin her like that, little man.”

Eddy snatched his hand away, as if Crystal had given him an electric shock. But as he looked into her eyes, he gave his girlfriend a faint smile, trying to put her at ease.

He watched as she opened her pocketbook, pulling out a pen and a sales receipt. After a bit of scribbling, Crystal passed him the note.

“Eddy the King,” it read in bubbly cursive, surrounded by drifting hearts.

October 18

She spread out the bathmat and greased up her hands. Got a big wad of cold cream and started reaching in but it wouldn't all fit. Pulled out nugs and dropped them on the towel. Told me I better quit whining. Put that pipe straight up the shoot. Said I needed to let it out in the shower cause it all goes to the same place. I looked for pieces of lead, but there was only a pill and corn. I couldn't stop yelling at it. She'd just look at me holding that Salem and ask if I was finished. Said she'd wait there all night if we had to.

CHAPTER 27

Eddy decided to take a break from the violin for a few days. To his surprise, Josie didn't mind canceling his upcoming lesson with Donald, saying that it would give him time to reevaluate things after the talent show fiasco.

"Don't make any big decisions right yet," said Josie. "It'll take a while before you can listen to your heart again."

With Halloween just a few days away, Crystal suggested that they check out a hell house. Eddy knew that they were a bit more involved than the normal Halloween fare, but he'd never set foot inside one.

"It's better than a haunted house cause it's real," said Crystal.

“Hell houses ain’t nothin but a bunch of queers trying to scare you into going to church.”

“You’re scared.”

“No I ain’t.”

“Well let’s go!”

There were plenty to check out in Roughedge County – two minutes with the Fecalton Reporter showed Eddy more than a dozen options. Some of them looked like regular haunted houses, save the fact that they were being held at churches. But Crystal and Eddy decided to go to the hell house around Fecalton Mall, as that was the most convenient one.

From a distance, *Seventh Circle of Hell* looked like an interconnected eyesore of busted-up house trailers. As they waited in line, Eddy was surprised to see entire families going in together. As much as he tried to act tough, the loud music and screaming started to get to him.

“You sure you want to do this?” said Eddy, as they inched closer to the entrance.

“Don’t tell me you’re getting scared.”

“I ain’t afraid of crap.”

Once they got inside, Eddy couldn’t believe that they had to pay money for this. He thought it was like paying to go to church.

“God bless you,” said the old woman, forking over Eddy’s change.

Even though Eddy had heard enough about hell houses to have a good idea of what to expect, he didn’t think that he would be going with a group inside. There were nearly two dozen people in their party, led by a clean-cut looking teenager, shirt tucked in the way Eddy used to do it.

"What you are going to see will disturb you," said the boy, holding a flashlight under his chin to make his face look more sinister. "For all of these things are happening in your backyard. Remember that God will judge the wicked and reward the righteous."

Eddy tried to brush it off, but the sounds around him made his heart race. As they were led through the rooms, he couldn't figure out what the big deal was. Most of it seemed ludicrous. The first room showed people playing *World of Warcraft*, which – in a matter of seconds – led them to devil worship. By the time Eddy's group had left the room, the teenage actors were cutting up a plastic baby doll, claiming they were sacrificing it for Satan.

Crystal gripped Eddy's hand as they were led into the second room, where an older couple was arguing. The woman claimed that her husband had cheated on her, which the man denied. After she gave him a mock slap, he grabbed her by the wrists, only to have their teenage daughter get in between them. Her mother told her to go back to her room.

"I can't take this anymore," she whimpered to the crowd.

As the lights turned red, she slashed her wrist with a plastic knife, as someone behind her spewed out fake blood from a ketchup bottle.

Then in the third room, there were a couple of teenage boys in what appeared to be a ghetto hospital room. Both of them were hooked up to IVs.

"We should have never smoked that joint," said one of the boys, looking over woefully at the other guy.

"We'd never touched one another if we hadn't tried marijuana," said the other guy.

As the room turned black, the guide turned back on his flashlight and stared straight out to the audience.

"I'm sorry to report that these two homosexuals just died from AIDS," said the guide, leading the group out into the fourth trailer.

Inside were a group of teenagers dancing to some the latest track by Lady Gaga. Eddy couldn't figure out what the big deal was until they turned down the music. One of the couples that'd been dancing together started to talk to one another.

"Wanna drink?" said the boy.

"No thanks," said the girl, who Eddy thought she looked way too much like Amber Abernathy.

"Don't be a party pooper. One swig ain't gonna hurt."

Then the lights turned out, leaving the room completely dark until the guide turned on his flashlight.

"They decided to lose their virginity that night," said the guide, revealing a devilish grin. "And that's not all that happened. Our brave little man took a little bit of LSD and thought he could drive his car to the moon. That is, until he lost his life driving through a cow pasture. And as to the lovely lady . . ."

When the lights turned back on, the girl was inside the room with a teenage boy who was dressed like a physician.

"You have to help me, doctor. Bobby's dead, and if I have his kid, I won't be able to go to college."

"Just sit back and relax, little girl. I'll take care of all your problems."

As the room went black, the girl let out a scream that made Crystal dig her fingernails into Eddy's arm.

“Ladies and gentlemen, she died from the abortion,” said the guide after turning on his flashlight.

In the next room, all of the people who had been in the other acts were rolling around on a red carpet. Red lights, some cloth scraps, and a floor fan did little to evoke Hell. But to avoid any confusion, Satan came out with his pitchfork and goatee, letting everyone know that they would be there for eternity.

Then in the final room, Eddy and the gang stepped into a trailer decked up like a chapel.

“Behold, I am Jesus Christ,” said a fat bearded guy, who would have looked more like Santa Claus if it weren’t for the white robe. “All of these people you have witnessed could have spent eternity in heaven. But because they did not choose me as their lord and personal savior, there was nothing I could do for them.”

After Jesus walked out, six more adults came around, begging everyone in the audience to pledge their allegiance to Jesus Christ before walking out into the world. Eddy grabbed Crystal’s hand and quickly led her out of the trailer, knowing that the last thing he wanted to do was stick around.

While people outside tried to shove tracts into his face, Eddy was stopped by Crystal.

“Why’d you run out of there so fast?”

“I don’t want to be around a bunch of people praying at the altar,” said Eddy. “It’s embarrassing.”

“I’m afraid,” said Crystal, the sincerity of her voice taking Eddy by surprise.

“What is it?”

“The way that guide was looking at us,” said Crystal. “It was like he knew that we got drunk and nearly did it.”

"How could he know that?"

"Maybe God told him."

"Whatever," said Eddy. "Can't we just go hang out at the mall?"

"But aren't you afraid?"

Eddy was scared, though he hated to admit it. While he still had the born-again virgin strategy and enough faith that Jesus would forgive anything, he remained nervous about some scenarios, such as a suicide bomber attack in his house just when he was about to bust a nut inside Crystal, eliminating any time for prayer. And he knew that if he was clever enough to beat out God's logic, then Jesus was probably one step ahead, waiting to send him down into the Fiery Furnace for getting his kicks.

"If we were to die tonight, we'd probably go to Hell," said Crystal, looking like she was about to cry.

"I know."

"Let's pray right now so God will forgive us for what we've already done."

"Not in the parking lot," said Eddy. "Can we at least make it to the food court?"

"What if we get hit by a car before then? Do you want to spend eternity in pain and suffering?"

"Alright," said Eddy, holding his girlfriend closely. "We can do it here as long as we don't have to pray out loud."

"I'll pray for the both of us," said Crystal. "You just got to say Amen and we'll both be fine."

"Alright," said Eddy, closing his eyes and bowing his head.

“Jesus, please forgive me and Eddy for all the sinful things that we’ve done together. We want to serve you, and we promise not to do anything dirty until we get married.”

Eddy wanted to amend the last line, hoping that Crystal didn’t see making out in the movies as an affront to God. But rather than make an argument, he uttered the most heartfelt “Amen” he could muster.

CHAPTER 28

Eddy didn't feel quite right committing himself to Christ again, but he figured it was the safest thing to do. If nothing else, it made Crystal act a bit more comfortable around him. And even if it'd probably take a few extra years to lose his virginity, he liked having a girlfriend. Though he'd never let Dylan know, he found himself falling in love with her.

As part of Eddy's new commitment, he considered burning the most perverse entries in his journal, but something within told him to keep them. He also thought that playing classical music again might be the right addition to his newfound Christian lifestyle. After a couple of weeks away from violin lessons, Eddy finally got enough courage to face Donald.

"You should have seen him," said Josie, recounting the talent show to Donald. "Had the crowd in the palm of his hand."

"That ain't exactly right," said Eddy.

"Always the modest one," said Donald, roughing up Eddy's gelled hair. "Shows he's a true performer."

"Yes, indeed," said Josie, nodding with her arms crossed. "I don't care what he says, he did wonderful."

"But I want to play classical music again."

"Is that how you really feel?" said Donald.

"I even brought back my Bach," said Eddy, pulling out his book of Bach *Partitas*.

"Well let's see what you can do with it," said Donald, taking a seat on the couch.

Something didn't feel right as Eddy played through the piece. Granted, he'd only practiced it a few times before returning to violin lessons. But as much as he hated to admit it, the music felt boring, even though he still found it more beautiful than anything Andrew Lloyd Webber had ever penned. And to worsen matters, Donald refrained from judging the performance as he squeaked his way through the first two sections of the *Partita*.

"Want me to go on?" said Eddy.

"What do you think?"

"I ain't practiced for a while."

"That's not the real problem," said Donald. "You aren't playing with passion."

"I used to."

"You never brought the same intensity to Bach as you did to *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Am I wrong?"

"But I really want to be a classical musician."

"You don't play like it," said Donald, shaking his head. "You have to accept the realities that I've told you about time and time again."

"But mom used to tell me I could be anything I wanted."

"They only say that in America, my boy. Problem is that people don't want to work for it. That's why you can never compete with the Asians."

Eddy stared out the glass patio door, looking at the dead leaves covering the grass. Except for the bushes, all the trees were bare.

"Let's consider that girlfriend of yours. What's her name?"

"Crystal."

"So let's say you want to marry Crystal. You'll be relying on her to bring in money for the family if you're going to be a classical musician."

"I'll work full-time and play whenever I can. I'll do whatever it takes."

"Just listen to me, Eddy. I know that deep down you want to be a star, just like your mom. And the only way you'll become a star is to completely dedicate yourself to showtunes."

"But I want to be a classical violinist!"

"Your playing tells me that isn't true," said Donald, grimacing at Eddy's defiance. "Stop whining and commit yourself to learning the great American songbook. That's the only way you'll become a star."

"I'll be a sellout!"

"Performing on a cruise ship would be more noble than scratching together a living as a classical violinist. Begging

for a pick-up orchestra gig isn't a life worth living. Take it from me."

For the first time, Eddy realized that Donald regretted his life as a violin teacher.

"I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did," said Donald.

"But didn't you once say I'm better than you?"

"I said that you held more promise, Eddy. And this is exactly what I'm talking about."

For the remainder of the lesson, Eddy plunged through the final passages of the *Partita*, only to be met with the same response by Donald.

"I urge you to consider going back to Andrew Lloyd Webber," said Donald, as Eddy and his mother walked out the door.

"Let me think about it," said Eddy, waving goodbye.

On their way home, Eddy and Josie stopped to pick up groceries at the Food Lion on the good side of Fecalton. While inside the store, he heard a Muzak version of "Music of the Night" from *Phantom of the Opera*. Even though he tried to brush it off, he immediately looked over at his mother, who had just placed a few boxes of Devil Squares into the buggy.

"God works in mysterious ways," said Josie, patting her son on the head as they moved down the aisle. "You have to learn how to listen to Him."

"Through elevator music at Food Lion?"

"God's everywhere," said Josie, swerving the cart around a display of pickled pig feet. "Even in Muzak."

After they checked out, Eddy pointed out a sheet of paper that was taped to the store window, right beside the exit. The

flyer advertised “Open Mic Night” at Brew Ha Ha, the coffee house that had just opened in downtown Fecalton.

“I think God’s trying to tell me something,” said Eddy.

“But that’s happenin on Sunday night. You’d have to miss youth group.”

“God’s telling me that this is more important!”

“You better just listen to your heart,” said Josie. “If you think that God’s leading you to play at that coffee house, I reckon we can let you miss one youth group meeting.”

Eddy rubbed his hands together and nearly pranced alongside his mother, as she pushed the buggy out to the Grand Cherokee. Already feeling the adrenaline pumping through him, he was ready to give showtunes another shot.

CHAPTER 29

By the end of the school week, Eddy figured it was time to have a "man lunch," which basically meant meeting up with Dylan without the girls around. Crystal and Kaitlin always seemed to hate it, but Eddy figured that they probably liked having time to themselves anyway.

"You wouldn't believe what Mrs. Upchurch did in class," said Dylan, referring to his Biology class. "Brought a fly back from the dead."

"How'd she do that?"

"Drowned the bastard and then sprinkled it with salt. Wasn't too long before the fly started twitchin and stuff. Didn't fly though."

Eddy carefully removed his lunch from his bookbag, careful not to reveal the Wet Wipes carton that his mother – despite all protests – continued to use.

"I need to talk to you about some stuff," said Eddy.

"And?"

"Don't know if I can get laid no more. That hell house scared the crap out of me."

"Whatchu talkin about, Funderburke?"

"It didn't bother me at first, but Crystal started talking it up and got me freaked out. Don't want to go to Hell for just blowin my load."

"Don't tell me you're just gonna jerk off for the rest of your life."

"Thinkin about waitin till I get married."

"But you got to test drive a car before you buy it," said Dylan. "Hell, even your mom done figured that out."

"Don't talk that way about her," said Eddy, trying his best to act tough, only to settle into a smile by the time he got his words out.

"You don't think she's goin to Hell, do you?"

"Probably not."

"So what's the big deal about getting it on?"

"I'm just a little afraid," said Eddy, taking a bite out of his PB&J.

"Afraid of what? All you do is stick it in a few times."

"It ain't like you've even done it. Crystal done told me."

"Told you what?"

"Said you ain't never been with Kaitlin."

"What the hell does she know?" said Dylan. "You gonna believe me or some girl who won't even put out?"

"Prove it then."

"You think I got a time machine?"

"I'll ask Kaitlin myself," said Eddy, putting down his sandwich to get up.

"I'll kick your ass."

"You're just a virgin, too."

"To hell I ain't," said Dylan. "You better sit your ass down before you get hurt."

"I bet you ain't even seen a girl naked."

"Not unless you count Josie Funderburke," said Dylan.

"Screw you," said Eddy, picking up his bookbag.

"At least I ain't afraid of getting a lil somethin somethin."

"I'm going to ask Kaitlin right now."

"Sit your ass down, Funderburke."

Eddy obeyed like a ghetto dog.

"You don't think I've fucked Kaitlin? I'll make it so we both get fucked."

"How?"

"We get 'em drunk over at Chantelle's and move the party upstairs."

"Crystal don't even want to drink no more," said Eddy. "She's all got the Lord."

"Put a pint of Southern Comfort in front of her and she how long that lasts. Pretty soon she'll be wantin to show you her titties."

"How we even gonna get them over there?"

"Robo Rob, butt nut. How else?"

"But I don't know," said Eddy. "I'm still hung up on that shit I saw."

"Fuck a hell house," said Dylan. "You got your entire life to get religion. Right now, you gotta get laid."

"But what if I die tomorrow?"

“You ain’t just gonna up and die. Trust me on that one.”

“I don’t know,” said Eddy.

“How about this? We just take them girls over there, get them drinkin, and when Crystal starts puttin the moves on you, then you can decide.”

“You ain’t gonna pressure me?”

“Not a bit,” said Dylan. “Just watch me and I’ll show you how it’s done.”

CHAPTER 30

As expected, getting Crystal over to Chantelle's was a hard sell. Even though Eddy's girlfriend insisted that it was a den of sinfulness, Kaitlin eventually convinced her that it would be right to check it out.

"Maybe you can even save some souls while you're there," said Kaitlin, as Dylan tried to keep a straight face.

Crystal reluctantly decided to go, swearing that she wouldn't even take a drink.

After Robo Rob had collected everyone, the five teenagers headed over to Brookshire Apartments. By the time they arrived, nearly a dozen people had packed Chantelle's place, but the mistress of ceremonies was nowhere to be found. Eddy stared down some beefy strangers in the kitchen, guys

from a rival high school. A group of girls surrounded Chantelle's daughter, each one with bright red lips from passing around bottles of MD 20/20.

Even Travis Medlin and his cousin Justin Trull were there, two of the most notorious guys at Robert F. Williams High. Despite their rat tails, no one in Roughedge County ever gave them shit, unless they hadn't heard the story. At age twelve, Justin nearly landed in juvie for shooting someone in the nuts with a BB gun. These days he supposedly carried around a 9mm Hi-Point.

"How's it going fellas?" said Dylan, stepping over to slap their hands.

Eddy followed suit, trying not to shake too much, as the infamous boys more or less gave them a cold shoulder.

"Who do we have here?" said Justin, looking at the girls.

"This is Crystal and Kaitlin," said Dylan.

"Nice to meet you," said Justin, kissing each girl's hand. "I seen both of y'all around school."

Even though Crystal nearly jerked her hand away, Eddy was happy that she let Justin kiss it. The last thing he wanted to do was start a scene.

"Where's Chantelle?"

"She went out on a run for *those* guys," said Chantelle's daughter Alexis, wedging herself into the group. "Can I have a hit off that bong?"

"Whatever," said Justin, nodding his head. "Just suck my dick later."

"Momma ain't gonna run back out to the store for y'all," said Alexis, as if she hadn't heard Justin's request. "She's already pissed about the crowd."

"We don't need your momma to buy us liquor," said Travis, picking up a half-gallon of vodka that was halfway empty. "Justinturd will pick up somethin after we finish this Aristocrat."

"I ain't goin back to the liquor store," said Justin.

"How about if we get somebody to drive you?" said Dylan, nodding over at Robo Rob.

"I'll sell you the rest of this Aristocrat," said Justin, pointing at the half-empty bottle of vodka.

"It's gonna take more than that tonight," said Dylan. "Robo Rob, you in?"

The freckled boy nodded his head.

"If you buy me a pint of Jack, I'll do it," said Justin.

After looking back at Eddy and Robo Rob, Dylan conceded. Considering the source, it was a pretty good deal. After all, Eddy never figured that he would benefit from Justin Trull's fake ID, which had become the stuff of legend around Robert F. Williams High.

Eddy passed a wad of cash to Dylan on the way out, leaving the maestro to look after Crystal and Kaitlin. The strange boys in the kitchen kept to themselves, but their glances were enough to make Eddy nervous. Thankfully, Travis didn't try any advances on the girls, passing around the bottle of vodka instead. After Kaitlin took a swig, Eddy was surprised to see Crystal hitting the bottle. He figured that she must be as nervous as he.

"What's going on here?" asked Chantelle, smashing open the door.

A tall man – perhaps a high school senior – walked in behind her, holding a large paper bag. Chantelle was decked out in a silky red robe and fluffy slippers.

“I told them they gotta leave,” said Alexis. “They wouldn’t listen.”

“You guys out!” shouted Chantelle to the group of boys in the kitchen. “Don’t come back here tonight, get it?”

None of them seemed bothered by Chantelle’s demands. Holding the liquor bag, the tall one led them out of the apartment. Eddy felt relieved.

“And here we have the last Southern gentleman alive,” said Chantelle, her voice sweetening as she scratched Eddy’s chin.

“Allow me to introduce you to my girlfriend Crystal and her bestfriend Kaitlin,” said Eddy, trying to sound as British as possible.

“How do you do?” said Chantelle, curtsying before each of the girls. “It’s about time we had more ladies here. All these boys, it’s just horrible!”

She smooshed her cheeks together and screamed, making the girls jump back. Then she laughed wildly, taking a pint of Two Fingers off the kitchen counter. Eddy figured the strangers bought it for her.

“Where did Justin go?” said Chantelle.

“He went on a run with Robo Rob and Dylan,” said Eddy.

“Boys, boys, boys,” said Chantelle, looking back at Crystal and Kaitlin. “The cops probably think I’m running a brothel, especially when they see such lovely ladies like yourself in the window.”

Kaitlin looked ready to flee at any moment, but Crystal seemed charmed by Chantelle, staring as she removed her robe. Eddy looked on proudly as Chantelle unveiled a white lace shirt, which revealed nipples as big as a can of cat food.

“Police! Open up!” shouted someone behind the door.

"It's just Dylan," said Alexis, trying to calm her mother. Chantelle ran up to the door and jerked it open.

"Get the hell inside!" said Chantelle to the boys. "Don't pull that shit around here."

"Don't worry Chantelle," said Dylan, reaching out to give her a hug. "We love you."

While Dylan held her, he pointed his finger towards his mouth, as if he were about to gag. Eddy tried not to laugh, but it was too much for Crystal and Kaitlin.

"We're fixin to get our freak on, ain't that right Funderburke?" said Travis, smacking him across the ass.

Eddy looked back with fury, trying to cover up his rage.

"Just fuckin with you," said Travis. "No need to get uptight."

Eddy didn't respond as he pulled out a bottle of Patrón Tequila. Because he'd once heard Crystal say that she wanted to try it, he figured it would be the best way to get her drinking again.

"I want some of that," said Chantelle.

"Be my guest," said Eddy, handing off the bottle.

After Chantelle took a pull, Crystal and Kaitlin passed it between themselves. Dylan and Robo Rob got busy with a half-gallon of Old Crow, eventually passing it over to Eddy, who took one of the strongest hits he could remember. As people cheered him on, he figured he'd nearly unloaded a pint, but there was barely a dint in the bottle.

As the liquor began to wake up Eddy, he began to think that he'd been silly about the whole hell house business. *Dylan's right*, he thought, knowing that he'd have a long life before him to get religion. After all, it seemed like his mother

had followed the path of sin to arrive at Jesus. He wondered if perhaps it's the only way to truly come to Christ.

Something seemed to be going on with Crystal, too. Eddy had never seen her so social, acting as if everyone was her bestfriend. He became resentful when she seemed too interested in taking on Justin and Travis' challenges, emptying the Patrón as quickly as possible. It seemed as if she was trying too hard to fit in with the boys, even though Kaitlin remained on the sidelines. But Eddy tried to let everything pass, knowing that the more she drank, the more likely she'd be willing to give it up.

Before long, Eddy could tell that everyone was full-fledged drunk, especially Chantelle. He knew she'd probably been drinking all day, but he figured that the pint of Two Fingers – which she took down with little effort – pushed her over the limit. Sitting on the couch with her eyes half closed, Chantelle talked about taking off her clothes and playing the harmonica. She spoke in soft tones, as if it were some mantra to revive her. After Travis began shouting insults, she got off the couch and stomped around.

"I've got to play the blues!" she screamed.

"Well take your clothes off and play!" shouted Travis.

"You can't tell me what the fuck to do," said Chantelle, as she ripped off her top.

Eddy couldn't believe how big her tits were, nearly as large as Josie Funderburke's double-D's.

"Rock on, Chantelle!" screamed Justin.

Alexis led her friends upstairs, as Chantelle grabbed the harmonica and tossed the case across the room.

"This one's called 'I'm Tired of Your Fucking Shit.'"

Cupping the instrument in her hands, she smashed it against her mouth, nearly knocking out her crooked teeth. Screaming and growling, she played with such ferocity that Eddy thought she was trying to blow the harmonica to bits. All the while she jiggled her body, making her sweaty tits smack against her belly.

"You ain't gotta take shit from nobody," said Justin.

After Chantelle took a breath, she stumbled back into position and played with more fire than Eddy had ever witnessed. She jerked the harmonica off her lips as if it were a leech, slurring some lick about how nobody cares about her.

"That's right, Chantelle" said Travis. "We don't give a *fuck!*"

"Hell no!" said Dylan, egging her on.

She took a deep breath and reattached the instrument, slicing it between her lips.

"Play that motherfucker!" shouted Justin.

"Y'all ain't nothin but a bunch of no-good honkies," sang Chantelle in a bluesy wail, rousing the audience.

"Your pussy done rot," said Travis.

"Ain't nothin but a limp dick motherfucker that wouldn't know good pussy if it hit 'em," screamed Chantelle, before blowing a piercing chord from her harmonica.

She pushed her ass into Travis's face, but he kicked it away, causing Chantelle to crash into her Pee-Wee Herman shrine. Clutching at her makeshift altar, she grabbed handfuls of wax and dried flowers, tossing them at the ducking spectators. For the grand finale, she took the Pee Wee doll by the legs and smashed it against the coffee table, knocking the last drops of Patrón onto the floor.

"I'm off to bed," said Chantelle, as if nothing happened. "If anybody wants me, tell them I got herpes!"

As everyone began to settle down, Eddy snuggled up to Crystal and put his arm around her. He knew that Alexis and her friends had probably occupied the bedrooms upstairs, but he figured that the bathroom would still be free. Rather than letting Dylan and Kaitlin have a chance, he decided it was time.

"Let's go upstairs," whispered Eddy into Crystal's ear.

"Why?"

"I wanna talk to you about somethin."

"Talk to me down here," said Crystal, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Eddy tried to ignore the boys' laughter and resume his seduction.

"I got somethin to give you."

"Give it to me now."

"I can't here," said Eddy. "We gotta go upstairs."

"Alright," said Crystal, flinging her arm as if she were trying to slap some invisible fly.

Eddy held Crystal's hand as he led her up the steep stairs. He was relieved that she didn't protest when he brought her into the bathroom. Wads of toothpaste and hair were all over the counter, making Eddy think about shutting off the lights, but he didn't want to miss watching every moment of what he hoped would unfold.

"I ain't scared no more," said Eddy. "I wanna do it."

"Here?"

"Don't you want to?"

"I don't know, Eddy."

“But you’ve already been drinkin. What’s it gonna matter if we just do it and get it over with.”

“I want our first time to be special.”

“What’s wrong with this?”

“Doing it on the toilet?”

“I thought we could lay down in the bathtub,” said Eddy. “I even brought a condom.”

“There ain’t no way I’m gonna do it here tonight.”

“How about if we go outside?”

“It’s freezing out there,” said Crystal. “We’ll do it when the time is right.”

“Before marriage?”

“Maybe. I’m getting tired of waiting too.”

Eddy leaned in for a kiss, putting his full weight into Crystal’s chest. Her shoulder blades ran smack into a towel rack. She leaned forward seemingly unfazed, letting Eddy get some ass in his hands.

“Go get 'em, Funderburke!”

Eddy immediately knew it was Dylan outside the door. Judging from the laughter, he wasn’t the only one listening in.

“We’ll find some way to do it soon,” whispered Eddy. “I promise.”

CHAPTER 31

Even though he made it through church the next day, Eddy suffered from a severe hangover that wouldn't let up. He practiced "Music of the Night" obsessively, hoping that it would somehow get him through the fog. By the time the sun had gone down, he finally felt confident enough to play open mic at Brew Ha Ha for the first time.

With his appetite back, Eddy sat down for dinner just minutes before they needed to leave. While stuffing down his third plate of Hamburger Helper, Josie walked out of the room, saying that she needed to take a leak. But when she returned, she held a white mask and a black cape that Eddy instantly recognized as genuine props from *Phantom of the Opera*.

“I thought this would be better than cat ears,” said Josie, handing the gifts over to her son.

“I’m gonna try them on right now!”

Eddy rushed off to the bathroom and strapped the mask over his face. Throwing the cape across his shoulders, he looked back at the mirror, amazed by what he saw. He felt like tonight could make him a star.

“We got to go!” said Josie, snapping Eddy out of his fantasy.

It wasn’t a problem finding parking, as downtown Fecalton was just as vacant on Sunday night as it was any day of the week. Donning his black cape, Eddy couldn’t wait to go inside Fecalton’s latest attempt to revitalize downtown.

Despite the shiny espresso machine beside the beer taps, Brew Ha Ha seemed more like a bar than a coffee house. Eddy immediately noticed that the place was filled with the new Charlotte crowd – thin blondes with freckled shoulders and facelifts, dark-haired men who talked as if they owned the joint, their voices booming against the exposed brick. Nearly everybody drank wine.

Yankee bankers, thought Eddy, echoing what Josie would sometimes say whenever they drove past another new suburban mansion. Many were as giant as plantations, built on acres of abandoned farmland.

With Eddy close behind, Josie walked up to the bar and asked about the open mic.

“Just put your name down,” said the bartender, a brunette who sounded Roughedge County, born and bred. “They’ll call you.”

Eddy printed his name on the sign-up sheet while snatching a glimpse at the skinny bartender, whose boobs looked too big to be real.

Josie ordered a Pepsi, only to be told that they served Coke. "And he'll have one, too."

"I'll actually just take some water."

The bartender smiled at him, while she scooped out ice. Eddy looked away, his cheeks burning while Josie settled the tab.

Josie picked out a table far from the bar, up against the windows that faced onto Main Street. Even Eddy knew there were almost no businesses left in the area, except a few banks and law offices. Looking out the window, he saw the Dixie Theatre, its marquee advertising – as it had for years – that the building was for sale. He remembered watching *The Lion King* there before it closed, walking up the stairs to the balcony where one could still make out a sign – faintly painted over – that read "Colored Only."

Screeching feedback made Eddy look over at the tiny stage, where some lady in a halter-top tried to manage the microphone, twisting it off the stand. Earlier, he had seen her review the clipboard, which now lay on a barstool. With the mic secured, she picked the list back up and looked out at the crowd, welcoming everyone to Brew Ha Ha.

"Looks like one of our favorites is first up tonight," she said, winking at the audience. "What you gonna sing, miss?"

"Your Cheatin' Heart," said a husky woman, trying to squeeze out of her chair.

"Let's give it up for Grace Garbagio!"

Watching her approach the stage, Eddy was disgusted by the old woman's appearance. She wore a lime green mumu

that drapped over her bloated body, exposing only her arms, which giggled as she bobbled her way to the front. Her haircut looked better suited on a women's basketball coach.

"Even though I once sang at Lincoln Center, I want y'all to know that I'm just as proud to be here tonight at Brew Ha Ha in good ol Roughedge County."

Even before she began to sing, the audience couldn't help but laugh at the vile woman. Ripping through the song with a whiny drone, she seemed completely oblivious to their ridicule, smiling as she belted out the words.

"Not much competition," said Josie, leaning over to whisper in her son's ear.

Eddy said nothing, his eyes fixed on the singer's ass, which looked like a heap of biscuit dough.

The Charlotte wives got up to sing the next few numbers, mostly 80s pop songs. Eddy knew he'd easily have a chance of stealing the show.

"Looks like we have a newcomer tonight," said the lady with the halter-top. "Let's welcome Eddy Funderburke."

He quickly put on his mask and hustled to the stage, fueled by the applause. After staring at the violin bridge to collect himself, he launched into the opening of "Music of the Night." He was amazed by the tones he yielded from the strings, trying to pour all of his anguish into the song. Opening his eyes, he saw that he had captured the audience, which didn't even cough once. Even the kitchen staff stopped bustling with the dishes.

For the first time, Eddy felt comfortable on stage. He even found himself moving about, letting his body's posture reflect the torment he felt inside. And just like in the YouTube clips he had studied, Eddy allowed his face to grimace like Joshua

Bell, hoping it would get him one step closer to fame. Something about the anonymity of the white mask – coupled with the black cape – helped give Eddy permission to contort his face at will, performing the music through his gestures.

He soared through the final phrase, allowing himself to hold the last note longer than usual, trying to build tension within his audience. His plan worked. Looking out onto the crowd while wearing the mask, he couldn't believe what he saw. Not only were they clapping wildly, but Grace Garbagio – the failure who made Hank Williams smash a liquor bottle in his grave – even shed a tear.

"Let's hear it one more time for Eddy Funderburke," said the hostess, as she took the microphone off the stand.

On his way back to the table, Eddy stared at everyone, hoping to remember every detail about the moment. He knew it was just the first of many triumphs.

"You did great," said Josie, getting up from her seat with open arms.

"It's what I always wanted," said Eddy, as he gave his mother a hug.

Never before had he felt so alive.

On the ride home, Eddy wouldn't even take off his mask, afraid that it could jinx his luck. As he flipped down the visor and looked into the mirror, he thought about even wearing it to school, but he knew he wouldn't be able to withstand the ridicule at Robert F. Williams High.

"Didn't you hear them?" said Eddy, continuing to flaunt. "They loved me!"

"I know," said Josie, lighting up a Salem. "You did a good job, but I'm about to tell you somethin that you probably don't want to hear."

"What?"

"Even if Donald don't agree, I think you do better playin classical."

"Are you deaf? I creamed them out there."

"Son, you played well. But it was only the showmanship hocus-pocus that really got to them. You don't need talent to do that."

"But you gave me this mask," said Eddy, still refusing to take it off.

"And I realized I shouldn't have the minute I saw you up there."

"You're just jealous cause I'm gonna be a bigger star than you ever were."

"Now listen here, little man. You got more talent than I ever had," said Josie, taking a big drag off her cigarette. "And I'll be danged if you waste it."

"Why can't I do whatever I want?"

"Cause you gonna be better than Kitty Lorraine," said Josie. "You got opportunities I ain't never had."

"Like what?"

"We'll quit Donald and sign you up for Southern Park Music School."

"How you think you can afford that?"

"Stu said he'd pay for lessons. You always wanted to go there, right?"

"I don't want his money."

"But he offered," said Josie. "Man couldn't get over how you felt after the talent show. He figured that if he'd get you good lessons, there wouldn't be nothin stopping you."

"Only thing's stopping me is you."

“I ain’t tellin you to quit, son. I just want you to really look deep into your heart.”

“I done know,” said Eddy. “Today Brew Ha Ha, tomorrow the world!”

“Just think it over, son. Stu’s got money.”

“Donald knows what’s best for me,” said Eddy, sweating underneath the mask. “I’m gonna be a star.”

CHAPTER 32

Hellbent on becoming the next Liberace, Eddy felt like he was back on his true path. He even picked up journal writing again, allowing it to be an outlet for his lightning. The only thing that bothered him is that he hadn't been able to lose his virginity. Even though the night at Chantelle's helped get things rolling, Eddy accepted that he needed better advice than what Dylan could spin.

He knew it'd take more than Chantelle's apartment to get Crystal to put out. Reading internet advice columns in the computer lab didn't do nothing but get him frustrated. But in a flash of inspiration, Eddy figured out that the answer might be just one call away. He decided to dial up Gabe Funderburke, self-proclaimed sexpert.

“What the hell you doin callin me, Mozart?” said Gabe. “This better be good.”

“I need some advice about girls.”

“You came to the right place. Now what can I do you for?”

“So I’ve been dating this girl who was scared to sex cause she thought it would send her to Hell.”

“Find this chick at a prayer meeting?”

“It don’t matter now, cause I got her drunk and she says she’ll do it, so long as the setting is right.”

“Rent a room down at the Motel 6,” said Gabe. “Always worked for me.”

“But I can’t even drive there!”

“Sorry, forgot I was dealing with a twelve-year-old.”

“I’m turning fifteen in a few weeks, remember?”

“As I was saying,” said Gabe, clearing his throat. “You need to get her to agree to it when she ain’t drunk. That way you got it locked up.”

“I can’t pull that off,” said Eddy.

“Just take her to some fancy restaurant,” said Gabe. “Ain’t met a woman yet that don’t like food.”

“But where are we goin to do it?”

“You gotta set up something special, or you could always bring her around when mom ain’t home.”

“How’m I supposed to get Crystal home before Josie comes back from work?”

“That’s for you to figure out,” said Gabe. “She can ride the bus home with you.”

“But that ain’t romantic.”

“How about you let her spend the night when mom leaves for Thanksgiving?”

"Mom's doing what?"

"Said she's goin away with that professor for a few days. Wanted me to look after your ass, but I told her that you should just stay at a friend's house."

"That's perfect!"

"So wine and dine that ass, then take a stab at it."

"Yes, sir!"

"And don't call me back until you've fucked her."

It didn't take long for Eddy to put his brother's advice into action. After digging around the house, he got together enough cash to take Crystal out to La Maison, the signature Italian restaurant in Fecalton Mall.

A few days later, Crystal and Eddy met up to have their first taste of La Maison. After sliding into the booth, Eddy had problems figuring out the menu. It didn't help that he didn't know any Italian food outside of spaghetti, pizza, and Chef Boyardee. Crystal flipped the heavy plastic sheets back and forth without saying a word, making Eddy think she also couldn't make out the offerings. At the risk of coming off as cheap, he suggested they share a pizza.

"Let's get a small pizza and split a salad," said Crystal.

After tallying the price in his head, Eddy hesitantly nodded. He just hoped she wouldn't ask for any appetizers.

Once he placed the order, Eddy didn't hesitate to bring up the subject that continued to preoccupy his mind.

"I'm ready to go through with this," said Eddy, trying to keep his voice as stable as possible. "I hope you are, too."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know."

"I don't know."

“This,” said Eddy, making a vagina out of his fist and ramming it with a free finger.

“That’s gross!”

“It’s natural, sweet treat.”

“I’m still not sure if I’m ready.”

“But you told me you were at Chantelle’s.”

“I said it wasn’t the right place.”

The salad arrived at the table. Unsure what to do, Eddy grabbed the tongs and asked Crystal if she would like some. She nodded her head coldly, prompting Eddy to drop a wad of lettuce on her plate. After he served himself, she dug around for some tomatoes, olives, and onions.

“I’ve got somethin special in mind,” said Eddy, between bites. “My mom’s headin out for Thanksgiving weekend.”

“She visiting family?” said Crystal.

“Nah, she never likes to celebrate,” said Eddy. “Mom always says there should be one day a year where women don’t have to cook, so she picks Thanksgiving.”

“But it’s the best holiday ever!” said Crystal. “You get turkey, stuffing, all kinds of pie.”

“I’ve seen it on TV.”

Crystal stared at the ceiling, as if she were gathering her thoughts.

“Maybe you can have Thanksgiving at my house.”

“I was thinking it might be a good time for, you know. Since my mom will be away and all.”

The waiter brought over the pizza. Eddy quickly abandoned the roughage for a slice of pepperoni and sausage. Crystal stuck with the greens.

“You mean they’re leaving you alone?” said Crystal, putting down her fork.

“Yep, I’ll have the whole place to myself.”

“We should throw a party!”

“I thought you’d want it just to be the two of us.”

“It’d be even better if we made it something big.”

“But what if somebody breaks somethin?”

“It’ll just be us and Dylan and Kaitlin. Robo Rob if we need a ride.”

“I don’t know,” said Eddy. “We might get busted.”

“But it’ll be great! We’ll have a good time together and then, you know.”

“If that’s how you want it.”

Crystal nodded her head. Eddy was about to take a bite of pizza, but noticed the tears collecting in her eyes.

“I really think it’s time,” said Crystal.

“Are you sure?”

“Ain’t nobody else I’d rather spend my entire life with.”

After swallowing his food, Eddy looked over at Crystal, who looked more beautiful than ever before. As much as he hated to admit it, he figured he wouldn’t mind spending the rest of his life with a girl like her.

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I want her to wrap it up like a eggroll inside them pantyhose. Cut right down the middle of the back seam just like this. Somebody told me to take out the vein and peel the leg to the white white quick. She pulled back the tab and told me to stay still.

I'll put a dirty coin in her fish mouth.

CHAPTER 33

The day before Thanksgiving, Josie woke up Eddy extra early.

"Shake, shake, shake," she sang, grabbing her son by the butt. "Shake, shake shake! Shake your *boo*-ty."

"I'm up," creaked Eddy, slapping her hand away as he looked over at the alarm clock. "Why you after me so early?"

"Stu's gonna be over here any minute for our mountain retreat. Ain't it so romantic?"

"Whatever," said Eddy, as he let his mother dress him, a habit he'd tried to break ever since going out with Crystal.

For breakfast, Josie heated up four Toaster Strudels in the microwave, letting Eddy put on the icing himself while she made final preparations. He found it strange having to pour

his own Mountain Dew. Josie, however, handled the childproof cap on the Sudafed bottle.

"Now don't be getting into anything while I'm away," said Josie. "The Spurlocks done promised me that they're gonna look after you. And you better show up there for Thanksgiving."

"I'll be fine," said Eddy, biting off a corner of his first pastry. "Ain't gotta worry about a thang."

"Look over by the basket and you'll see the name and number for the hotel where we'll be staying."

"Y'all gonna get separate rooms?"

"Now listen, little man. Me and Stu adults."

"Whatchu think God would say about that?"

"Don't be tryin to push my buttons, boy. You'll understand when you get older."

"Why won't you let Crystal stay over? We've been together just as long as you and Stu."

"I done told you, son. We're adults, and what you and Crystal got ain't nothin but puppy love."

"That ain't true," said Eddy. "You and daddy were already married by my age."

"Times have changed," said Josie, zipping up her suitcase on the couch.

"I don't get why I can't sleep with Crystal."

"Cause y'all too young, and that's the last I wanna hear about that."

"Ain't no different than you gettin it on with the professor. Premarital sex is all the same."

"I ain't done such a thang with him," said Josie. "And if I had, it wouldn't even matter cause we're married in our hearts."

"Just like me and Crystal."

"I told you not to talk like that, boy."

"My bad."

"You just gotta accept Stu," said Josie, coming over to put her arms around Eddy. "He might even propose to me while we're up there. You wouldn't want to ruin that now, would you?"

Eddy found it hard to accept that she might soon remarry. Above all, he hated the idea of having to share her with another man in the house, just months after Gabe had moved out.

"Promise me that you'll give him a chance."

"I feel like goin back to bed," said Eddy.

"But you ain't even finished your pastries."

Even though Eddy was still hungry enough to take down an entire box of Toaster Strudels – microwaved or frozen – he decided to lock himself in his bedroom.

"You can't do this to me," said Josie, beating on the door. "I ain't gonna leave until we got things straightened out."

"Everything's fine. Happy Thanksgiving."

Eddy could still hear her at the door. He looked out the window and watched Stu's Saab creep up the driveway.

"He's here," said Eddy.

"Come give your momma a hug."

"I'll see you when you get back."

"You better come to the door this minute, Eddy Funderburke."

He figured it'd be better to give in, especially since he didn't want to do anything that could make her rethink the trip. He walked out of the door and submitted to a hug.

“I’ll be back before you know it,” she whispered in his ear, planting an itchy kiss.

CHAPTER 34

On Thanksgiving Day, Dylan and his father came by the trailer to pick up Eddy. He decided against wearing the clip-on tie and coat that his mother had laid out, figuring it didn't matter anyway. His suspicions were confirmed when Dylan stepped to the door in jeans and a camo t-shirt, something he wouldn't ever be caught wearing at Fecalton Mall.

After watching some football back at the Spurlock house, Eddy climbed into a minivan with the rest of the family to head over to Dylan's grandma's. Eddy knew it was their tradition to eat dinner there every Sunday, but this was the first time he'd been invited inside the old farmhouse.

As the screen door smacked shut behind him, Eddy was overwhelmed by the scent of collards, buttermilk biscuits, and

peach cobbler. After eating nothing but boloney sandwiches and frozen pizzas the entire weekend, he was ready for a real meal.

Once they sat at the table, Will asked Eddy if he planned to attend the youth group meeting on Sunday.

"I've been playin this gig downtown at Brew Ha Ha," said Eddy. "It's better for my career than youth group."

"But Dylan's still got to go," said Mrs. Spurlock, giving her son a stern look.

"They kicked me out."

"What?"

"Said I was too cool."

"Shut up," said Will, kicking his brother underneath the table.

Dylan raised his fist, but his father's stare was enough to make him retreat.

During the meal, Eddy tried to be friendly to both Spurlock brothers, wanting to make a good impression before their family. He knew that Dylan would chide him afterwards for sucking up to his brother, but Eddy simply couldn't ignore Will when he brought up the talent show.

"You did good up there," said Will. "But you were a bit too nervous."

"Yeah, I've been trying to deal with stagefright. This gig downtown helps."

"My drama teacher told me just to imagine the entire audience naked."

"Who told you that?" said Mrs. Spurlock.

"Mr. Sickbert."

"Somebody should report him," his mother continued.

“But it works,” said Will. “You didn’t see me nervous up there, did you?”

“Maybe you should have been,” said Mr. Spurlock, reaching out for the biscuit basket.

“Blaspheming the Lord and all.”

Eddy wanted to keep on talking to Will, but he figured that artsy topics weren’t welcome at the dinner table. As he tore apart a chicken wing, Eddy thought back to elementary school when he and Will were both singled out as talented and gifted. Sometimes the teachers would take them out to old Civil War sights or let them identify wildlife in the parks and forests of Roughedge County, occasionally digging for arrowheads or catching sunfish with a net.

While Dylan made faces at his older brother – prompting Mr. Spurlock to slam his fists down on the table – Eddy realized that Will was one of the few at Robert F. Williams High that had actually praised his performance in the talent show. Even though Eddy still thought of his former bestfriend as a redneck and – therefore – out of his social class, it hurt him to realize that he’d lost touch with the one person in Roughedge County who might have understood him.

November 28

Got off the orange recliner. They say give em plain yogurt but I knew it'd make me sick. Could it even make it to the kitchen sink. Mom opened up the dishwasher and told me to rip it open right there so I did. Didn't take her long to turn it to pot scrubber and fill up the whole trailer with that hum.

Went to wash away all the red and said this would never happen again. But my eyes peeled back into streaks of white light. Looked in the mirror and knew I had been here before and this shedding was all part of the process.

CHAPTER 35

Crystal and Eddy decided to make Saturday the big day. Even though he was still against throwing a going away party for his virginity, Eddy tried not to let it show. After all, he knew he would at least enjoy the company of his closest friends.

Around lunchtime, Robo Rob and Dylan pulled into the driveway. At Thanksgiving, Eddy had forked over enough cash to pick up a half gallon of Old Crow and Captain Morgan's Parrot Bay, as well as some mixers and Smirnoff drinks that the girls wanted. As they got everything out of the Lexus, Eddy couldn't believe the bounty.

"Had to buy Chantelle a goddamn fifth of Christian Brothers just to get all this shit," said Dylan. "Said if we ever disturb her in the morning again, she'd pull a gun on our ass."

"At least we got the loot," said Eddy. "I owe y'all one."

"No biggie."

After dropping off everything on the counter, Eddy whipped out a garbage bag from beneath the sink. He'd already filled up two 13-gallon ones with all the posters of bikini-clad women that once graced his walls, as he wanted to make sure Crystal wouldn't be jealous when he brought her back to the chamber.

"All the trash goes here," said Eddy, tying it to a cabinet handle. "Don't just toss shit wherever."

"Who you think you are, my fucking father?" said Dylan, getting some rare chuckles out of Robo Rob.

"Just be careful," said Eddy. "No tellin what Josie Funderburke would do if she caught me."

While Dylan and Eddy poured their first drinks of the day, Robo Rob was getting busy with the prescription bottles lined across the kitchen counter.

"You found Eddy's Ritalin?" said Dylan.

"Better," said Robo Rob, sounding as cold as the Terminator.

"What is it?"

"Ativan, Soma, Dexedrine," said Robo Rob, picking up bottle after bottle. "Demerol, Tylox, Mepergans."

"What the fuck we need all this liquor for?" said Dylan. "We got everything we need right here!"

"Have some of the Vicodin," said Eddy. "She don't keep track of those."

"Ain't one of these got her name on it," said Dylan.

"She gets 'em from the rest home. Just don't go crazy."

Without saying a word, Robo Rob crushed three pills with a butter knife. After rolling up a crisp dollar bill, he snorted the entire pile of dust.

"Straight to the brain," said Dylan, slapping Robo Rob on the back.

Not wanting to come off as prudish, Eddy asked for a couple.

"Crushed or straight?" said Robo Rob.

"I'll just swallow it," said Eddy, picking up his mixture of Old Crow and Coke.

"Check him out," said Dylan.

"It ain't like I ain't done it before," said Eddy, swallowing the pill.

"Why were you holdin out on us then?"

"There's more where that came from," said Eddy, immediately realizing that he had said too much.

After the buzz had kicked in, the boys drove over to Kaitlin's, where Crystal was supposed to spend the night. The girls ran out as soon as the Lexus pulled into the driveway. Eddy noticed someone staring out the window, inspecting every move. Hoping to ease the situation, he offered a nervous wave, which only made him all-too-conscious of the weight of his hand.

"You waved at my father," said Kaitlin. "What a dork!"

Everyone in the car laughed, except Eddy.

"I was just trying to cover our ass," said Eddy.

"Thanks for picking us up, Robo," said Kaitlin, as if Eddy's blunder no longer mattered.

"Yeah, thanks," said Crystal, smiling.

"Don't I get any credit?" asked Eddy.

“Whenever you get your driver’s license,” said Kaitlin, even making Crystal chuckle.

Eddy figured it was best to keep quiet until they got back to the trailer. As they pulled into his driveway, he looked over at his girlfriend, wondering how she would react to his unkempt yard. Thankfully, neither she nor Kaitlin said a word until they got out of the Lexus.

“Where’s the liquor?” said Crystal.

“Right this way,” said Eddy, holding her hand as they made it up the cinderblock stairs.

“It’s a beautiful house,” said Crystal, once inside.

“I’ll show you the bedroom later,” said Eddy, trying to smile.

He turned away when she looked at him.

“What’s wrong?” said Crystal, squeezing Eddy’s arm.

“This ain’t how I planned it,” said Eddy.

“Everything’ll work out fine,” said Crystal, putting her arms around Eddy. “I love you, you know.”

“I know,” said Eddy, hoping to end the discussion. “I feel the same way.”

Looking out the kitchen window, Eddy saw Robo Rob downing a family size bottle of Robitussin Cold and Cough, a sign that no one would be leaving anytime soon. Kaitlin and Dylan came in through the backdoor.

“How’s the two love birds?” said Dylan.

“Things about to get better,” said Eddy, pouring a large rum and Coke for Crystal, then one for himself.

“You better watch out,” said Dylan. “Eddy’s gonna drop a pill in your drink.”

“What?” said Crystal.

“Come on, Dylan,” said Eddy, trying to sound playful.

“What are those?” said Kaitlin, pointing at the prescription bottles.

“Shit that Mrs. Funderburke takes to put up with Eddy,” said Dylan, shaking a bottle of Vicodin. “Want one?”

“What does it do?” said Crystal.

“Just enhances your buzz,” said Dylan. “Nothin much.”

“You don’t need those,” said Eddy, wanting to snatch the pills away from his friend.

“I think the lady can decide herself,” said Dylan, giving Eddy a wink before turning the bottle over to Crystal.

“What do the others do?” said Kaitlin.

“Same shit,” said Dylan. “Makes you relax, feel right.”

“Sign me up,” said Crystal, taking out a couple of Vicodins.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” said Eddy fiercely under his breath, hoping only Crystal would hear. She ignored him as she washed down the pills.

“I want one of those,” said Kaitlin.

“Be my guest,” said Eddy, hoping that the pills wouldn’t put everybody asleep before the sun went down.

Maybe it was all the Coke, but somehow everyone made it up past midnight. Despite all the pills and liquor around them, Eddy handled everything in moderation. He wanted to remember every detail of this special night, which he knew would change his life forever.

But Crystal seemed more interested in getting wasted. She was going through more liquor than anyone, making a huge dent in the coconut-flavored rum. Considering her swagger, it was a miracle that she hadn’t barfed on the carpet.

When things were starting to wind down, Dylan pulled Eddy outside.

“You mind if I use your mom’s bed?” said Dylan. “Kaitlin’s wants it tonight.”

“You ain’t gettin a ride with Robo Rob?”

“Ain’t no way that fucker can drive. Dude’s had more Robitussin and pills than I’ve ever seen.”

“Guess you can take it,” said Eddy. “Just don’t fuck up the sheets or nothin.”

“She ain’t no virgin,” said Dylan. “I can tell you that.”

When Eddy and Dylan went back inside, they found the girls giggling at one another, while Robo Rob mumbled to himself in the corner of the living room. Crystal was working on another rum and Coke.

“Why’d you guys go out there?” said Kaitlin.

“We didn’t go nowhere,” said Dylan, crouching down and putting his arm around her.

“Don’t think you can move so fast,” said Kaitlin, snuggling into Dylan. “We’re ladies, you know.”

Crystal snickered.

“What in the hell is so funny?” said Eddy, surprised by how angry he sounded.

“I don’t know, the moon!” said Crystal, making Kaitlin laugh at the ceiling.

Watching his girlfriend, Eddy thought she looked like a buffoon. He wanted to remind her about their promise, but he felt uncomfortable saying anything in front of Dylan and Kaitlin, knowing it could make things more difficult.

“Come on, Kaitlin,” said Dylan, nodding his chin at Eddy. “Let’s give the love birds some space.”

“But I wanna watch!” said Kaitlin, which made Crystal roar with laughter.

To Eddy, the evening began to feel like a joke at his expense.

"See you in the morning, my love," said Crystal in a mock British accent, as Dylan pulled Kaitlin up from the floor.

Eddy watched Crystal swaying back and forth with a smile plastered across her face, feeling disgusted with her happiness. Even though Crystal didn't utter a word, he knew she preferred the floor than the long walk to the bedroom. Grabbing her by the armpits, he forced her to stand up and walk.

When she dropped onto the bed, Eddy feared that she might pass out. He got down on his knees beside the bed and looked into her eyes.

"Is tonight still the night?" said Eddy.

Crystal nodded. He reached over for a kiss, but her body felt cold. He pressed his lips against her forehead, hoping it would lighten the mood.

"I've gotta go," she said, running out the bedroom door.

Within seconds, Eddy heard her barfing into the toilet. He considered helping her, but he was too freaked out by the sight of puke, knowing it might push him over the edge. Only when he heard the shower running did he decide to check on her.

"Go away," she said meekly.

"Are you alright?" said Eddy.

"I just wanna be alone."

Eddy went back to the bedroom and spread out some tea candles that he bought at Wal-Mart. By the time she got out of the shower, he had lit nearly three dozen.

"You burnin down the house?" said Crystal, wrapped in a ragged beach towel.

"Just tryin to make things more romantic."

As Eddy tried to catch her, hoping to give her a big hug, she plopped down on the bed. Her damp hair wet the pillowcase.

"Are you ready?" said Eddy, trying to sound as calm as possible.

Crystal kept silent, as if she were trying to fall asleep. Eddy peeled back the towel and began licking between her legs. The internet had taught him that cunnelingus was supposed to loosen up a woman better than anything, but Crystal hardly responded.

"Does it feel good?"

"Yes," she said, as if something had awakened her.

He kept licking what he thought might be her clitoris, trying to recall the diagrams he'd seen on Wikipedia. He worked his fingers inside her, but she squirmed away, closing her thighs around his hand.

"What's wrong?" said Eddy.

"Stop screwing around and fuck me."

Taking out a strip of fresh condoms from beneath his bed, he pealed one open and placed it on his throbbing penis. He nearly came as he rolled it down his shaft.

Crystal was almost asleep, but Eddy was still able to wedge apart her legs. In the dark light, he had problems trying to position himself and Crystal seemed unwilling to help. He propped up her legs to get a better view.

"You think I'm a whore," said Crystal.

"But I love you."

Right when he got it all the way in, she gasped as if waking from a nightmare.

"Just relax."

After a couple of rounds, Eddy came. Luckily, his dick was stiff enough to try a few more strokes.

"I wanna go to bed," said Crystal, as she rolled over on her side.

Eddy decided not to protest, having achieved what he'd wanted for so long. After he was sure that she was asleep, he grabbed a flashlight and examined the sheets. He was appalled that he couldn't find any blood, not even on the condom.

Doing his best to avoid waking her, he stuck a finger inside her and swabbed around. He thought she had passed out until she began to moan.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for blood."

"What?"

Eddy decided not to respond, letting the flashlight be the judge. As if studying a dipstick, he couldn't find any trace of red on his finger. Nor was there any flowing out of Crystal's fleshy flower.

He needed another drink.

Walking out of the bedroom, Eddy wondered why he hadn't broken her hymen. *She's gotta be a virgin*, he thought, as he passed Robo Rob, who was still bundled up in the corner of the living room, talking to himself.

Taking a hit of Old Crow, Eddy tried to believe that he had been the first. He thought about asking her about it, but was too afraid of what she might say.

CHAPTER 36

Eddy woke up at eleven in the morning, way too late to make it to church. Dylan had already told his mom that he would be staying at Robo Rob's, so Eddy hoped this would be enough to cover his ass. He knew he'd find out soon enough when his mom got home later that day.

To his surprise, Crystal seemed in fine shape the next morning, no hangover whatsoever. As they chatted together in bed, she tried his best to reassure Eddy that he was her first.

"Some girls just don't bleed," said Crystal.

Eddy decided to trust her, having read that some girls even busted their hymens on the playground. He knew he should

stop stressing over it, figuring that she just didn't remember when she lost hers.

"Let's do it again," said Crystal. "This time it'll be your birthday present."

"But that ain't tell next week!"

"Don't you want it early?"

Eddy watched the clock as he wiggled his dick into her open crotch. He hoped to go at least three minutes, but after eleven strokes, he was done for.

"Is that it?"

"I did better than last night," said Eddy.

"It's OK," said Crystal, rubbing his hair. "I still love you."

Now that both parties had agreed that virginity had been banished from their lives, they made an appearance before their adoring public. But after everyone scavenged a breakfast of Oatmeal Cream Pies and HoHos, Eddy forced them out the door, saying that his mother could be home any minute. He bundled up the trash and handed off the liquor, as Robo Rob tried to get himself together enough to drive. It looked like he hadn't shut his eyes all night.

Eddy waited alone for hours for Josie to arrive. Not until nightfall did she return, arguing with Professor Sneed as she got out of the car. He heard her slam the backdoor and lock it tight.

"I don't ever want to see you again!" she screamed, as Stu beat on the door.

Emerging from his bedroom, Eddy could barely contain his smile.

"Go away!" his mother shouted.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," said Stu, his words ringing clear through the tin door.

"You just better get out of here before I whip out the shotgun."

"Can you at least mail back the ring?"

"I'm gonna count to ten."

Josie didn't even get to three before Eddy heard Stu's Saab spin out of the driveway. After turning to her son, she embraced him harder than he could remember.

"You were right about him," said Josie. "He ain't nothin but a liar."

"What happened?"

"Let me take some medicine and then I'll tell you all about it," said Josie, stumbling over to the kitchen counter and pouring out a handful of pills.

As his mother washed them down with a gulp of Sudafed, Eddy took a seat on the couch, eager to hear the gossip. Even though he hated to admit it, he was happier about this turn of events than losing his own virginity.

"He did just like I thought he would," she said, sitting down next to her son. "After he took me out for surf n' turf, he drove me to this lookout and proposed. But I ain't gonna marry that no good bastard."

"Thank God," said Eddy.

"Don't you be using the Lord's name in vain, hunny. Let me tell ya, I've done learned a lesson I ain't ever gonna forget."

Eddy got up from the couch to get the last tub of Neapolitan ice cream, the only thing he figured that could make this weekend better.

"Everything was fine 'til today," continued Josie. "On the way home, he said he'd been watching me for years. And as

soon as I asked him what he was talking about, he leaned over and called me Kitty."

"I didn't tell him bout it," said Eddy, shoveling a soupspoon full of chocolate into his mouth.

"I know you didn't, hunny. He said he knew it from the beginning. That's why he wanted to get to know me."

"How'd he find out?"

"Man's been workin on a book about bluegrass for nearly five years, and ain't once said a thang to me about it. I bet all them snooty professors at Piedmont College knew what he was up to."

"You can't hide things like that with the Internet and all."

"I know, son. I just didn't think anyone would care. It was only me who wanted to forget about Kitty Lorraine so I could raise you and Gabe to be good Christian folk."

Eddy peered down into the ice cream, trying to dig out the biggest mound that he could force between his teeth.

"That professor said he came to love me for who I is," said Josie. "But I know for a fact that he was just spending time with me so he could write that book. Bet nothin's gonna stop him now, but I'll be danged if I'll play his games."

"You'll find somebody better. Won't take you long."

"I done told ya, I'm 32 years old now, son. Might as well get ready to meet the maker."

"But you gotta love somebody," said Eddy, nearly trembling as he looked down at his mother's pantyhose.

"Let me tell you a thang about love," said Josie. "You better watch it with that Crystal, cause she's just gonna break your heart like everyone else."

"We ain't that close anymore," said Eddy, as he saw his mother with refreshed eyes. "She ain't special like you."

“Don’t need a Ph.D. to figure that out.”

Eddy put down the ice cream and ran over to hug Josie. He could feel her bra straps poking out of her silky blouse.

“Whatchu doin, son?”

“I just missed you,” said Eddy, rubbing his head against her neck.

“You better straighten up,” said Josie, gently pushing her son away. “Don’t be acting that way with me.”

“I wasn’t doing anything,” said Eddy, nearly turning away in embarrassment.

“You about to turn fifteen, little man. You can’t be doin that kind of stuff with your mother.”

“There ain’t nothin wrong with lovin you.”

“You know good and well what I’m talkin about.”

“I’m goin to bed,” said Eddy. “Don’t worry about tuckin me in.”

“Wait a minute, son.”

Eddy stormed back to his room and shut the door. Getting into bed with all his clothes on, he couldn’t believe that he actually tried to make a move on her. Lying there, he waited for over an hour, hoping that his mother would let herself in. When he accepted that she wouldn’t come, he buried his face into the pillow, pressing away the tears.

CHAPTER 37

A couple days later, Josie offered to take Eddy out to Crawford's Fish Camp for his 15th birthday. He'd been there a few times, wearing out the all-you-can-eat catfish until his stomach felt deep fried. But this time, she said that his girlfriend could come along. Even though Eddy had recommitted to Crystal after the crazy weekend, the idea of bringing the three of them together made him a bit nervous.

It didn't help that Josie acted like a zombie after breaking things off with Stu Sneed. The entire week she'd barely been able to get to work, moaning on the couch about how bad things were.

Even after they picked up Crystal, Josie was singing the same ol' song.

“I’m in a bad place,” said Josie, after Crystal joined Eddy in the back. “I reckon he’s done told you what happened.”

“I’m sorry to hear about it, Mrs. Funderburke.”

“Thank you, dearie. It just brings a smile to my face knowing that such a sweet little girl is gonna take good care of Eddy one day.”

From the back of the Grand Cherokee, Josie’s swerving seemed even worse. Eddy shrugged his shoulders at Crystal, who looked a bit concerned about his mother’s driving.

“You sure you wanna go to the fish camp, mom?”

“It’s your birthday. Ain’t no way we gonna miss it.”

Eddy was relieved that they made it to Crawford’s Fish Camp without an accident. But he was embarrassed as his mother could barely make it through the door. It was up to Eddy to tell the old Asian lady – who always served as a hostess – that they needed a table for three.

“Here’s your present,” said Josie, sliding a gift card to JC Penney across the table.

“Thanks,” said Eddy, inspecting the card as if he were looking for germs.

“I’m tellin you, hunny. Your momma’s in bad shape. I’ve even started talkin to Preacher Manus about everything.”

“Mom!” said Eddy, ever mindful that Crystal was beside him.

“Ain’t nothin to be ashamed of,” said Josie, waving one of the young waitresses over to the table. “We’ll have all-you-can-eat catfish and iced tea.”

“Ain’t you gonna let Crystal decide what she wants? She’s been watchin her weight.”

“Eddy!” said Crystal, punching her boyfriend in the leg.

“Order anything you want,” said Josie. “But don’t get the lobster. It’s frozen.”

“I’ll just take the salad bar.”

“Comes with the catfish, if you want it, hunny.”

“That’s alright,” said Crystal, offering a trembling smile.

After placing the order, Eddy walked up to the salad bar. He passed the pale tomatoes and white lettuce, filling up his bowl with fruit cocktail and baby corn. When he looked over, he noticed that his mom had dropped a wad of cucumbers onto the floor, which she tried to hide by kicking them under the salad bar.

Back at the table, it didn’t take long for the waitress to bring out hushpuppies and salt-and-pepper cats. As usual, Josie nibbled away at the tails of all her fish. She always tried to convince Eddy that it was a delicacy, but to him they tasked like fried fingernails.

“Open your present, son.”

“You already gave it to me, mom.”

“Just look at you and Crystal over there,” said Josie, swaying in her chair. “Y’all don’t know the first thing about love.”

“Mom!”

“Listen to a woman that’s been there,” said Josie to Crystal. “Y’all ain’t got nothin on me and Bosephus.”

“That’s it,” said Eddy, slamming his fists on the table.

Before anyone could grab it, a plastic plate of catfish took a nosedive off the table. Nearly everyone in the restaurant turned around to witness the commotion.

“Now look what you’ve done,” said Crystal.

Josie leaned over to pick up the plate, but came crashing down on her knees. Her face landed on top of a large catfish.

“Somebody get a doctor,” said some stranger. “Do we have a doctor in the house?”

It seemed like no one else in the restaurant was able to respond, with the exception of the hostess.

“My husband call the ambulance right now,” said the hostess.

“Don’t know if she’s breathing,” said Eddy, as he put his cheek against her mouth.

“Did she choke on somethin?” said someone at the neighboring table.

“Can’t find a pulse,” said Eddy, feeling her neck.

“Feel her heart,” said Crystal.

“Ain’t no way I’m gonna touch her there. You do it.”

Crystal joined the pair on the floor and began unbuttoning Josie’s shirt. To Eddy’s surprise, his mother had forgotten to put on a bra.

“I can’t do this,” said Crystal.

“You expect me to?”

Crystal pushed her palm against Josie’s sternum.

“I can’t feel nothin.”

“I think it’s over on the left side,” said Eddy.

“Her left or mine?”

“I don’t know, just feel around.”

Crystal tried maneuvering around Josie’s boobs, pressing at different spots to find a heartbeat.

“You feel anything?”

“Not yet.”

“You know CPR?”

“You do it,” said Crystal.

“I ain’t gonna kiss my own mother.”

“We’re trying to save her life!”

As Crystal continued to pump away at Josie's breasts, Eddy blew into his mother's mouth.

"You gotta create a tight seal," said a stranger.

Looking over at his mother's giggly tits, Eddy decided that he needed to give it his best shot. He closed his eyes and locked lips with his mother. But no matter how hard he pushed air into her, nothing changed.

"Do it again," said the stranger. "Short breaths."

Eddy reluctantly followed his advice, but that didn't seem to work.

"Let me try," said the stranger.

"Go away, pervert!"

"I'm certified in CPR. I can save her."

As Eddy argued with the stranger, a Latina worker came out of the kitchen with a bottle of ammonia. She poured it into a dishrag and held it to Josie's nose. After a few moments, the spirits seemed to be working on her, as Josie kept murmuring things about Stu Sneed.

"She'll be OK," said the lady, as she buttoned up Josie's blouse.

"What happened?" said Josie.

"Everything's alright now," said Eddy, holding his mother's hand.

"Y'all want some more salt-and-pepper cats," said the waitress, her hand planted into her hip.

"We'll take some to go," said Eddy, as a group of first responders busted in with a stretcher, telling everyone to clear out of the way.

"She's OK now," said the Asian hostess, trying to hold them back. "Nothing to report here."

The burly men helped Josie back into her seat.

“She might have had one too many of these,” said one of the responders, holding up a prescription bottle that he found in her purse.

“How we gonna get home?” said Crystal.

“We can take her in for observation,” said the medic. “Y’all can stay at the hospital.”

“I’ll be fine,” said Josie, sounding as if she were in a dream. “Just call Preacher Manus. He’ll take me home.”

While Josie recited the number, Eddy typed it into Crystal’s cell phone. Looking over at the first responders, he was relieved that Josie was going to make it.

December 13

She's on top of me, all white and pink. Hair smells like boiled peanuts. She tries to put it back inside, but her fingernails got caught on the tip. I won't scream, just stuff my mouth with a pillow and let me feel my own heat. Hoping my teeth will crack. She whispered that I could call her whatever I want and tonight she'll be Kitty again.

My life is just a big experiment. Might have something to do with [redacted]. If I could peel back her skin I knowed she'd be a robot under there and that ain't crazy talk.

She said I could do it like my dad but I heard him pull up and she wouldn't get off. He didn't say anything just shot and the blood tasted like gunmetal. If he'd just leave I known I'd reach my hand up there like cleaning a fish but all I can do now is roll away the meat.

CHAPTER 38

Over the next couple of weeks, Josie took some time off from Southern Pride Rest Home to recover. Eddy soon learned that Preacher Manus made frequent visits to the Funderburke trailer, offering guidance to get Josie back on track. When preparing dinner every evening, Eddy usually got an earful of whatever she'd talked about with the preacher.

"Feel like I got a big rock off my back," said Josie, lying on the couch. "Done told the preacher about Kitty Lorraine and everything."

"How'd he take it?"

"Said he understood that I needed to change paths years ago to serve the Lord. But he told me there ain't nothin right

about livin a double life, and all that devilish lying finally caught up with me."

"You agree with him?" said Eddy, tossing some boil-in-bag rice into a pot.

"Don't question what a preacher tells ya, little man. He's the mouthpiece of the Lord."

Eddy kept quiet as he worked a can opener around a tin of lima beans.

"He even told me I should get in touch with my family," continued Josie. "And that's what I intend to do."

"Like who?"

"My momma, maybe my brothers and sisters if they'll speak to me. But you know your granddaddy done long gone from this world, sad to say."

"You gonna call 'em or somethin?"

"Thinkin about inviting all of them over for Christmas," said Josie. "Preacher Manus said it was the right thing to do. Try to get everything out in the open, all reconciled."

But before too long, Josie was up and moving about. Even though she stayed away from Southern Pride Rest Home, she didn't dare let her hands go idle around the trailer. Before long, she had cleaned every inch of the doublewide, leaving Eddy's bedroom for last. Unfortunately, she didn't mention it to him until it was too late.

"What are these?" she said, after Eddy came home from school one day.

"I don't know."

"Don't play dumb with me," said Josie, holding a shiny strip of condoms. "I wanna know why you had these under your bed."

"They're probably yours."

“I don’t need 'em,” huffed Josie. “I ain’t diseased like everybody else these days.”

“Well they ain’t mine.”

“Don’t be lying to me, little man.”

“Fine,” said Eddy, fumbling for an excuse. “I got them at school from my health teacher. Happy?”

“Don’t give me that,” said Josie. “I know you’ve been using them.”

“For water balloons.”

“So you ain’t gonna to admit to putting them on?”

“I ain’t done nothin wrong!”

“We’ll see what you think after you’ve been grounded.”

“That’s crazy,” said Eddy. “They ain’t illegal.”

“They are in this house,” said Josie with such conviction that Eddy knew his mother had fully recovered.

“So you gonna take away my allowance?”

“You can’t leave this house for the next two weeks, except for school and church.”

“But school’s almost out!”

“So?”

“Not even open mic at Brew Ha Ha?”

“Nope.”

“Can I at least use the phone?”

“Don’t think so.”

“But how am I gonna talk to Crystal?”

“From what I see, it might do you a world of good to stop talking with her for a while.”

“She might break up with me!”

“If she can’t handle a little time apart, then she ain’t the right one for you anyway.”

Eddy began walking towards his bedroom, fuming about everything his mother told him.

"Did I give you permission to leave?"

"Do I have to ask?"

"Well you just march yourself back to your bedroom, Eddy Funderburke. I'm gonna be keepin a close watch on you."

Eddy said nothing as he made it down the hall and opened his bedroom door. He'd never seen the place so clean. It looked as if she'd used all of the skills she learned at Southern Pride Rest Home to turn his abode into an antibacterial chamber. The bed was made, its sheets defined by sharp creases. There were no clothes on the floor, as everything had been put away. Even his violin case had been shined and placed atop his chest of drawers.

Opening the closet door, he was shocked to see how much she had thrown out. All the clothes that didn't fit were nowhere to be seen. But his heart quickened as he looked behind the water heater, hoping that his cache of lingerie hadn't been disturbed. Reaching his hand into the darkness, he felt nothing but emptiness. Eddy's journal was missing.

CHAPTER 39

At school the next morning, Eddy rushed to find Crystal before the first bell, eager to tell her what happened. When he saw her, she looked as if she already knew something was wrong.

"Why couldn't you talk last night?" said Crystal.

"My mom grounded me for two weeks. Can't use the phone, go out, nothin."

"What'd you do?"

"She started going crazy cause she found some condoms."

"Oh my God!" said Crystal, covering her mouth with praying hands.

"But that ain't what I'm worried about," said Eddy. "I had this journal where I wrote down crazy stuff. Most of it didn't make no sense, but I did write about us making love."

"Did she read it?"

"I don't know, but I can't find it. I hope she just tossed it out."

"She's gonna call my mom, is she?"

"Just tell her that Josie's on drugs."

"You think she's gonna believe me?" said Crystal. "How could you be so stupid?"

"I got an idea," said Eddy, putting his arms on her shoulders to calm her. "Now you might think this is crazy."

"This better be good."

"We can move out together," said Eddy.

"Maybe you can," said Crystal, backing away.

"Whatchu mean?"

"I ain't gonna be no high school drop out."

"But things are different now," said Eddy. "I'll take care of us with my violin."

"You gonna play for change in front of Wal-Mart?"

"I'll do whatever it takes."

"We ain't even got a car."

"But we can get one."

The bell rang, warning students that they had two minutes to get to homeroom.

"You're only grounded," said Crystal, walking away. "You can tough it out."

Eddy turned around and headed towards class. He was sad that Crystal didn't seem eager to get a jumpstart on their conjugal life, but Eddy knew she was right. By the time

Christmas rolled around, everything would be fine. At least that's what he hoped.

CHAPTER 40

During Christmas vacation, Eddy lived in constant worry, trapped behind the walls of the Funderburke trailer. He'd realized that fleeing really wasn't an option, but he dreaded the day that his mother would confront him about the journal. To ease his nerves, he got back on his *Tetris*/violin regime with a passion that he hadn't felt since summer.

Whenever he had to leave his bedroom, he was always on his best behavior, even if Josie acted like there was no more punishment in the works. After all, she'd only made one additional demand – Eddy had to perform some Christmas music at Southern Pride Rest Home. But he didn't mind going along with it, as it would give him a chance to improve his showmanship, especially since he wasn't allowed to go to

open mic at Brew Ha Ha anymore. He promised to play five Christmas carols, but Josie insisted that they all be cheerful, so that none of the elderly residents would feel even more depressed during the holidays.

"How much will I get paid?"

"You'll be helping people who don't have much to live for," said Josie. "That should be enough."

"Thanks," said Eddy, rolling his eyes.

"At least you'll have a captive audience. Most of them can barely walk."

By the day of the concert, he'd convinced himself that Josie had tossed out his journal without even looking inside. Thinking back to all the scenes of sex and violence he'd penned, he figured there was no way she'd let that fly without opening her mouth.

Eddy arrived at Southern Pride Rest Home in time to watch Josie distribute the medications. He was tempted to ask how many pills she would keep for herself, but the last thing he wanted to do was send his mother over the edge.

At dinner, Eddy tried to eat some salisbury steak and glazed carrots, but it was tough to keep them down. It didn't help that most of the patients had to take their entree pureed. He couldn't turn away from an elderly man, who would get the concoction halfway up the straw, only to give up. A trembling woman beside him had better luck, but the brown sludge oozed out of the corners of her lips, sending Eddy running for the bathroom.

After putting dinner away, Josie and the staff led everybody into the recreation room, severely lit with florescent tubes. It took nearly a half-hour to get everyone to sit in the folding chairs that Eddy arranged earlier in the

evening. Some residents rolled up in wheelchairs and cots, IVs still attached. In the corner, a blue plastic Christmas tree stood majestic, covered with shiny streamers and spray-on snow.

Despite the senile audience, Eddy felt nervous performing without his *Phantom* mask and cape. He found some relief in knowing that any mistakes he made would probably go unnoticed, but that still wasn't enough to calm his nerves. When the jitters finally got too tough to take, he took comfort in realizing that most of his audience would soon be dead anyway, an excuse Josie always used when telling him about her on-the-job fuckups.

Once Eddy gave the nod, Josie stepped up to the podium, which was usually reserved for preachers and bingo callers.

"I'd like to thank all y'all for comin out here tonight," said Josie, her green eyes electric. "Tonight I have the pleasure of introducing one of the greatest fiddle players you'll ever hear. He's gonna entertain y'all with *five* carols to get you in the Christmas spirit. So give a big ol' round of applause for *my son* Eddy Funderburke."

After receiving a lukewarm welcome, Eddy launched into "Jingle Bells." Some of the residents tried to clap in time with the music, often missing the mark. Others tried to sing along, a practice that the nurses tried to stymie until Josie began belting out the words herself. Eddy shot her a look of disgust, upset that she was trying to become the center of attention. It only made him slice through the song much faster than usual, throwing the audience further off beat.

Next came "Deck the Halls," where nearly everyone lost their place during the "Fa La La" section. Eddy had to struggle to keep an even pace, using his right foot as a

metronome. Even though the room was barely heated, drops of sweat tricked down his forehead. He was even clinching his teeth.

After making it through the second number, he began to realize how much he hated playing in front of a senile crowd, even if he wasn't doing half bad. *I'll close my eyes and make it through one more*, thought Eddy. Taking a deep breath, he announced that "O Holy Night" would be his final selection. He was too afraid to look over at his mother, knowing he had agreed to play five songs, none of them sad.

He raised his bow and tried to imagine himself alone beside a still lake, when someone in the audience began to cough. Eddy stood motionless as the old man tried to breathe, whimpering "water" as loudly as he could, until a nurse brought him a bottle.

"Please do not sing or clap during this final song," said Eddy.

He immediately realized he made a bad mistake. Josie's fiery eyes looked ready to strike him down.

Eddy dove into the opening phrase, yielding a brackish sound. As his mother would have put it, he was playing with his heart while giving careful attention to the shape of each note, allowing the pace to drift at moments to release his feelings.

He wasn't even a third of the way finished when he heard a women cry, awakening him from his trance. He tried to focus again on the music, but the sobbing increased. Then someone began wailing, almost as if he were about to meet the maker.

One of the nurses rushed over to check his out.

"Possible MI," she said over the music.

“What?” mouthed Josie.

“Myocardial infarction.“

“I don’t get it.”

“A heart attack, Josie!”

“Call the doctor and get some goddamn aspirin!” yelled the patient.

Eddy continued to play the piece, as nurses and beefy attendants flocked to the man.

“Everyone calm down!” announced Josie, using her hands as a megaphone. “Soon as we get this man out of here, we’ll keep on with the entertainment.”

Staring at his mother, Eddy looked as if he’d just seen a ghost.

“I told you not to play no sad song,” said Josie, as she ran over to her son.

“But it’s about Jesus’ birth.”

“Quit being a smart aleck,” said Josie. “As soon as we get him out, you better commence with ‘Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer,’ got it?”

“Ain’t no way I can play now.”

“Don’t you quit on me, little man,” said Josie, digging her airbrushed fingernails into his arm.

“Josie, we need the GTN!” shouted one of the orderlies.

“The what?”

“GTN sublingual now!”

Eddy was relieved that his mom had bolted off. As the nurses repositioned the man, he thought that playing a children’s Christmas song seemed about the worst thing he could do.

By the time she came back with the drug, Eddy could hear the ambulance just outside. Flashing lights burst through the

windows, making the rec room look like an underground disco.

While the first responders worked to get the old man out of there, Josie got on the podium.

"Now when I count to three, I want everyone to join me in 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.' How does that sound, everybody?"

Most of the audience still couldn't take their eyes off heart attack man.

"A one, a two, a one, two, three."

After Josie unleashed her husky soprano, she nodded over at Eddy to join in. As hardly anyone was paying attention anyway, he put the violin up to his shoulder and grinded away. Making Josie more upset was the last thing he wanted to do.

CHAPTER 41

Over the next few days, Eddy wasn't too enthusiastic about practicing, even after Josie reported that heart attack man was alive and well at Southern Pride Rest Home. Something about playing Christmas tunes in front of a senile audience drained his passion for popular music. Sometimes he tried on the *Phantom* mask, hoping it would yield enough inspiration to get back into Andrew Lloyd Webber, but usually he let it collect dust while he tried to take his *Tetris* skills to new heights.

Even though Eddy was still grounded, Josie dropped him off at Fecalton Mall to pick up Christmas gifts. He thought about trying to meet up with Crystal, but he knew it wouldn't

be right to pick out her present as she stood beside him. Plus, he had something special in mind.

Josie gave him an hour, leaving Eddy little time to waste. First, he bolted into Belk and picked up a tiny assortment of Godiva chocolates, hardly bigger than his wallet. He hoped it would be good enough for Josie. But Crystal's gift – he knew – had to come from Victoria's Secret.

Although he had walked by the store many times, Eddy had never been inside, not even with Crystal. They were too afraid of being caught by someone they knew, especially someone from church. The store always held great power over Eddy, making it difficult to stroll by without getting an erection. After all, the mannequins wore designs of his dreams: firm corsets of crushed velvet, paired with black stockings. He loved how their legs were amputated with lace.

He tried to psyche himself into doing it, mindful of the ticking clock. He walked past the store three times, unable to gather enough courage to go in, even though he knew it wasn't a crime for a teenage boy to enter Victoria's Secret alone. Despite his obsession, Eddy was nervous about handling lingerie in public, especially before salesclerks who looked like actresses in a soap opera.

Realizing that he only had a half hour, he lurched past the security guard and headed straight to the back. Surveying the fabrics, skillfully arranged on tables and racks, he could feel his cheeks swell with blood.

He calmed himself by focusing on an assortment of black corsets, exactly what he hoped to find. As he approached them, he stuffed his hands into his pockets to adjust his throbbing boner. He put his chode in covert mode, flipping it towards the ceiling and tucking it into his waistline.

As he thumbed through the garments, he became even more aroused when fingering the black lace. He no longer cared that he was committing such debauchery with others around. While pushing away a security tag to find out how they were sized, he noticed the steep price. He swiftly abandoned the corsets, as if they reeked of insecticide.

He headed over to the bras, hoping he could afford a nice lace one, perhaps with a matching garter belt and stockings. But everything he touched was too expensive. He noticed, however, that these items didn't have security tags.

Despite the temptation to steal, Eddy figured he would just go with whatever he could afford, even if it were just a pair of red panties. He hoped Crystal would be impressed.

"Can I help you?" said a salesclerk towering above Eddy, who was down on his knees, fumbling through some garter belts.

"I've got it."

"If you need anything, just ask."

"Will do," said Eddy, admiring her black stockings – seam down the back like shrimp.

"Still serving time?" said someone behind him.

Eddy turned around to find Chantelle's daughter Alexis.

"What are you doing here?" said Eddy, getting up from the floor.

"I thought you couldn't go nowhere."

"Mom let me out for some Christmas shopping."

"Ooh, whatchu getting?"

"Stuff."

"No shit, Sherlock. What do you want?"

"I don't know."

"Just point it out and I'll handle it," whispered Alexis.

"What?"

"I'll take it to the dressing room and walk out," said Alexis. "I never get caught when I do it for momma."

"You sure?"

"Ain't no biggie," said Alexis, agreeing to meet Eddy at the fountain in a few minutes.

Eddy couldn't resist such an offer, even though he knew it might blow his chances at getting Crystal anything at all for Christmas. With little hesitation, he picked out a garter belt and lace bra that he thought would be perfect. Alexis also grabbed the matching panties, though he didn't feel they were necessary. After watching Crystal undress many times, Eddy accepted that women never wear matching underwear, despite what he'd seen in lingerie catalogs.

While Alexis snuck off to the dressing room, Eddy picked out a package of lace-top stockings. After looking at the chart on the back – more complicated than multiplication tables – he decided to get Crystal the smallest size because of her height. He didn't want to insult her by getting something too big.

Eddy tried to keep his hands steady while handing money to the cashier. When she asked if he wanted the stockings wrapped, he agreed, only to change his mind once he saw her unfold a box. He knew he couldn't hide such a large package from his mother.

"Just put 'em here," said Eddy, handing over his plastic bag with the Godiva chocolates.

The cashier tucked the stockings and receipt into the bag, no questions asked.

As soon as he got out of the store, he sat down at a bench close to the fountain. Once he was certain that no one was

watching, he ripped open the packaging and stuffed the stockings into his coat, along with the box of chocolates. He tossed the plastic bag in the trash, but kept the receipts out of habit.

While waiting for Alexis, he couldn't calm himself, even though he knew that he hadn't done anything wrong. *It's her ass if she gets caugh*t, Eddy thought, rubbing his knuckles into the concrete bench. He hoped Alexis would come out soon, as he needed to meet his mother in ten minutes, according to his Taco Bell watch.

She finally appeared, walking at such a leisurely pace that Eddy wondered if she had snatched the loot.

"Follow me," said Alexis, drifting past Eddy on her way out.

He shadowed but kept his distance, not wanting to be associated with her in case something went wrong. Outside the mall, Alexis didn't stop walking until she approached the end of the parking lot. Eddy watched her duck between a couple of SUVs.

"Did you get it?" said Eddy, after he caught up.

"It's all here," said Alexis, pulling out a black wad from under her bulky sweater. Eddy tucked it into his coat.

"Just don't let Crystal know about this, alright?"

"No worries."

"I owe you one," said Eddy, realizing that he needed to meet his mom.

"You'll get me back," said Alexis, smiling.

"Whatever you want."

"Oh!" said Alexis, as soon as he'd turned around. "We found Crystal's iPod."

"What?"

“She left it over at our place couple days ago,” said Alexis. “Robo Rob knows I got it, but I don’t know if he told her yet.”

“Crystal was there?”

“She and Kaitlin.”

“Oh yeah,” said Eddy, trying to act like he already knew about it.

He looked down at his Taco Bell watch, noticing he only had a minute.

“Tell Chantelle I said hello. I’ll be back soon.”

“You better,” said Alexis, as Eddy walked out of sight.

While walking towards the Wal-Mart entrance, where he was supposed to meet Josie, he thought about running back to Alexis, begging her to tell him everything that Crystal had done outside his watch. But as he got closer to Wal-Mart, he spotted his mother’s Grand Cherokee. Jogging towards the SUV, he tried to figure out why Crystal had never said anything about going to Chantelle’s without him. Nothing seemed to add up.

CHAPTER 42

Just as Preacher Manus suggested, Josie reached out to family members that she hadn't contacted ever since she changed her name. Although she tried to reconnect with all her siblings, only her sister Shirley forgave her for all the years of silence. She promised to make the drive up for Christmas dinner, bringing along her son Jason, who just got out of jail. Hazel Lorraine – Josie's mother – also offered her forgiveness, but would only agree to come if Josie did all the cooking.

Gabe promised to come home on Christmas Eve to help out, but Eddy soon realized that his brother wasn't so reliable. By mid-afternoon, he headed out alone to find the tree they used every year, a plastic one that they stored in the woods. It

didn't take him long to hose off all the bird nests and white turds, but decorating the bastard proved to be a challenge.

"You ain't hangin the garland right," said Josie.

"Why can't we just use them icicles?"

"Cause they get all caught up in the vacuum cleaner, remember?"

Sure enough, Josie had to butt in to get the garland to hang just right. But she left Eddy to hang the balls and ornaments, which he did with little precision. After all, most of them were dusty yarn angels that looked more like ghosts than God's helpers.

"Guess we might as well open presents now," said Josie. "You go in your room and I'll put 'em under the tree."

When it came to receiving gifts, Eddy was never one to protest. He went back to his bedroom, fished out the Godiva chocolates, and waited for his mother to call. When he returned, Eddy was surprised by the number of packages under the tree. As usual, Josie hadn't placed any tags on them, ever since a young naughty Eddy unwrapped the corners of his presents, too eager to find out what was inside. Josie gave him such a tongue lashing that he suffered from diarrhea for days, leaving him with an itchy ass that made his fingers smell like vinegar.

Looking over the boxes, he hoped he could trade in most of the presents for liquor money. But as he opened them, he discovered that most were just gift cards, wrapped in large boxes to throw him off.

"Could have at least gotten me an Abercrombie one," said Eddy, hoping the comment would dig into his mother.

"Here's your last one," said Josie, seemingly unfazed.

Eddy took the thin package, which he could already tell was something framed. Digging his fingernails into the loose paper, he pealed back the front.

"I can't believe it!" said Eddy, trying to contain his excitement.

It was a picture of Christine with the Phantom, along with a Playbill from a Broadway performance of *Phantom of the Opera*.

"I hope it'll always inspire you," said Josie. "You're gonna make it big one day, no matter what kind of music you play."

"Thanks mom," said Eddy, his body flush with excitement, hoping his mother was right.

On Christmas morning, Josie was already working the kitchen when Eddy got out of bed. Over the past week, she'd been studying the cookbooks that the ladies of Bunkum Creek Church put together every year. Although she mostly stuck with what she knew, Josie tried two creations that she always enjoyed at church luncheons: lima bean casserole and sour cream cake.

The sour cream cake recipe had called for a Bundt pan, but she realized that she could just substitute a couple of round flat pans that she used for cornbread. She figured she'd make extra icing and stack the two cakes on top of one another, but she forgot to adjust the baking time. Unfortunately, she cooked them too long, making both halves look like burnt frisbees. Despite her best efforts with a nail file, she couldn't scrap off all the scorched parts. She hoped the icing would overpower the charred flavor.

She had more success with the lima bean casserole, through she broke a nail while shredding a hunk of Velveeta.

But as to the green beans, potatoes, fried chicken, sweet potato pie, and Pillsbury croissant rolls, she pulled everything off without a hitch.

Gabe didn't show up until an hour before everyone was supposed to arrive. Busy with final preparations – shoving dishes into the oven and making sure that nothing was burning on the range – Josie gave Gabe a cold welcome.

"We needed you help, Gabe."

"Want me to set the table?"

"That's alright," said Josie, shooting her oldest son a stern look. "Everyone knows I'm just the little red hen."

"Well the tree looks great," said Gabe, looking at the few remaining gifts on the floor.

"Get your mind off them presents, son. We need to get hustlin."

Eddy unwrapped a stack of Styrofoam plates and arranged them beside the plastic silverware. Josie used the kitchen counter to make it buffet style, ordering Gabe to start with the bread and end with the desserts. Even though Gabe had his own designs about the hot plates, he didn't protest when his mother switched everything around.

Then the doorbell rang.

"Don't forget the napkins," said Josie, as she walked towards the door, removing her Kleenex make-up shields from her collars.

As Josie opened the door, Eddy took out a stack of paper napkins that Josie had snatched from the rest home. He figured they should go somewhere between the croissants and foam plates.

"I can't believe it's you," said Josie, welcoming her family.

“Who else you expect?” snapped an older woman, who Eddy figured must be his grandmother.

“It just seems like yesterday since we last saw each other.”

“Feels like fifteen years to me,” said the woman, offering a brief hug before marching over to Eddy and Gabe.

“Y’all must be my grandchildren,” she said, looking them over. “Might as well call me Hazel, since we barely know one another.”

“My name’s Gabe and this here’s Eddy.”

“Dang proud to meet you. Got any whisky?”

“We don’t keep liquor in the house,” said Josie. “It’s devil juice.”

“Just get me some tea,” said Hazel, tossing her hands in the air.

Eddy filled up a plastic tumbler, while Josie greeter her estranged sister and nephew.

“I can’t believe this is little Jason,” said Josie, combing his hair with her fingers.

“Things change, Josie. Ten years in Red Onion done made a man out of me.”

Eddy didn’t know Jason’s entire story, but he knew he grew up hard. All his brothers died from some ailment that doctors could never figure out. But Jason somehow survived and found a job as an embalmer, making good money until *The Charlotte Observer* uncovered that he was charging people to have sex with the freshest corpses. But according to Josie, he didn’t go to prison without a fight.

Eddy was surprised by Aunt Shirley, who was basically a clone of his mother, except twenty-years older and sporting a football-helmet perm. Josie had told her son that Shirley survived on the promises of Jesus Christ and Publishers

Clearing House, which she believed would mail her a million dollar check any day now.

Eddy was surprised to see that they'd bought presents, but he knew they wouldn't be opened until after dinner.

Once everyone filled their plates, everybody basically kept to themselves, pretending to be watching *A Christmas Story* on TV. Only Hazel would occasionally chime in.

"Them Mexicans at KFC make better chicken then this," said Eddy's grandmother, throwing her bones into the kitchen sink. "If you hadn't been so hellbent on being a star, you'd know how to fry chicken right. And that's why no mens ain't ever gonna take care of you either."

Eddy found it amazing how Josie endured blow after blow, retaliating only with second helpings and her sweet-tea smile.

"That sour cream cake would work better as an intake manifold," said Hazel. "Ain't that right, Jason?"

"Whatever you say, grandma."

The presents the strangers handed out were just as exciting as the conversation. Besides a bottle of imitation Stetson cologne, Gabe walked away with a crown-shaped air-freshener for his car, Big Lots sticker still attached. Eddy didn't do much better, getting a box of wornout *Southern Living* magazines, three rolls of pennies, and a peg puzzle that Jason probably stole from Cracker Barrel.

After everyone opened their gifts, Josie invited everyone to spend the night, but Grandma Hazel and the bunch seemed eager to hit the road.

"Gotta sleep on my own bed at Christmas," she said. "Ain't go no liquor here anyhow."

Eddy – for one – was happy to see them go, though he hoped that Gabe at least would stay around.

"There's this girl I might have knocked up," said Gabe, hugging his mother goodbye. "Figure I should at least drop by her parents to say hello."

"Come back when you've found the Lord."

"We'll just aim for next Christmas," said Gabe, before turning to his kid brother. "You take good care of her, Mozart."

"I ain't Mozart no more," said Eddy.

"Just hope you got rid of that virginity. Sounded like it was ailing you."

"What?" said Josie.

"Just kidding," said Gabe. "See you next year!"

Having the trailer to themselves once again, Eddy asked his mother if she needed any help with the dishes.

"It's alright," she said, lighting up her first cigarette of the evening. "I'll be fine."

After getting a better idea of his roots, Eddy had a hard time falling asleep. Confident in the direction he needed to run, he was more determined than ever to become a violin superstar.

CHAPTER 43

The day after Christmas, Josie ended Eddy's probation, allowing him to go over to Crystal's house. But he hadn't stopped thinking about what Alexis told him about the iPod, which bothered him even more since he couldn't call Crystal to get the story straight. Despite it all, he was more preoccupied with the idea of seeing his girlfriend wrapped in Victoria's Secret.

Right before heading over, he waded up the lingerie, stuffed it inside a Kleenex box, and sealed it inside a brown paper bag, putting nearly three dozen staples across to top so Josie wouldn't be able to sneak a peek. Just to be safe, he stuck the gift into his backpack along with a couple condoms, praying that Josie wouldn't search and seize.

When Eddy arrived, Crystal's family barely acknowledged him, as everyone was too wrapped up watching *Hanoi Hamster* on pay-per-view. Without saying a word, Crystal smiled and led him upstairs. He was surprised when she closed and locked the bedroom door.

"Your parents don't mind?"

"They don't like to be disturbed when they watching TV," said Crystal. "We're fine."

Eddy put his arms around Crystal and held her close, realizing how long it had been since he last touched her.

"I missed you," said Eddy, whispering into her ear.

After Crystal gently let go, Eddy scoped out the room, as it was the first time he'd ever been inside. Most of the furnishings seemed rather typical for a fourteen-year-old girl. From the vanity to the nightstand, everything matched – all cream with gold trim. But Eddy had never seen anything like her daybed, a dainty number with porcelain knobs and gold railings.

"Is that an antique?"

"No, silly. It's Target."

He tried to ignore the flowery wallpaper and bedspread, hoping that she'd never decorate their future home in such flamboyant style. The hammock filled with Ugly Dolls also made him wince.

"Wanna open presents?" said Eddy.

"I'll start," said Crystal. "But you've got to close your eyes."

While Eddy had his eyes shut, he could hear her fumbling around the closet.

"You can open them now."

Sitting before him was a generic box labeled *World's Largest Crossword Puzzle*. Opening the lid, he hoped there would be something else inside it. But there it was, a ginormous crossword puzzle that never seemed to end, no matter how many times Eddy unfolded it. The clue book alone was as thick as *Moby Dick*.

"Do you like it?"

"I guess."

"It'll cover your entire wall," said Crystal. "Isn't it the coolest?"

"Sure."

"I know you like *Tetris*, so I thought you'd love it."

"But crossword puzzles won't help me become a world-famous violinist."

"It's just for fun, Eddy. Lighten up!"

"Thanks," said Eddy, crawling over to give Crystal a hug.

As Crystal kept her arms by her side, Eddy knew he should have kept all his responses upbeat. He hoped he didn't blow his chances to see his lover draped in lingerie.

"Here's yours," said Eddy, handing over the brown paper bag.

"Don't tell me you brought lunch."

"Just open it."

Eddy watched as she tried to remove the staples. It didn't take her long to give up and rip open the top.

"I hope you'll like it."

"Kleenex?" she said, pulling out the box.

"Better," said Eddy. "Look inside."

After plunging her hand into the plastic window, she pulled out the bundle of lingerie.

"It's from Victoria's Secret," said Eddy, hoping that would score him some points.

"What the hell *is* this?" said Crystal, holding the garter belt away from her, as if it were a dead rat.

"Just try it on," said Eddy.

"It's for whores."

"Please, Crystal?"

"You wear it."

"At least put on the stockings."

"Fine," said Crystal, peeling off her jeans.

After tossing her pants across the room, Crystal picked up a stocking and worked her leg through, trying to pull it over her bulky thigh.

"They don't fit."

"It'll work," said Eddy, trembling as he grabbed the other one.

Crystal nearly kicked him in the face as he tickled her feet, trying to force the stocking over her foot. He yanked it up quick, hoping to gain enough momentum to pull the lace up to her crotch.

"See," said Crystal, pointing at a nasty run.

"It don't matter," said Eddy. "Just keep them on while we sex."

"I don't want to," said Crystal, taking them off hastily.

"But I thought it'd be special."

"This ain't me."

"They the wrong size?"

"That's not what I meant!"

"I was only trying to do something you'd like," said Eddy. "I guess I should have just wrapped up the iPod you left at Chantelle's."

"What you mean?" said Crystal.

"Alexis told me all about it."

"I got it back," said Crystal, turning away. "That's all that matters."

"What were you doing over there?" said Eddy, visibly upset.

"Should I have asked permission? I couldn't even call your house, remember?"

"You didn't have to go get wasted with my friends."

"How you know what I was doing?"

"Don't tell me you'd just leave your iPod around," said Eddy. "You were probably passed out on the floor."

"Whatever," said Crystal, crossing her arms.

"Why couldn't you have just hung out with Kaitlin?"

"She *was* there," said Crystal. "And that's not all."

"What?"

"You wouldn't even want to know," said Crystal.

"Don't be holdin out on me."

"Are you sure, Eddy Funderburke?"

"There ain't nothin you can say that would hurt me."

"Oh yeah?"

"Just say it!"

"You ain't the only one I've slept with."

"That's fine," said Eddy, immediately relieved. "I don't care if you've been with Kaitlin. We can do a threesome."

"We've already had one," said Crystal, showing her snaggletooth.

"With who?"

"Dylan."

"Say what?"

"You heard me," said Crystal, backing away.

“Dylan thinks you dog ugly,” said Eddy. “Ain’t no way he’d stick his dick in you.”

“It wasn’t the first time,” said Crystal. “He’s why I became a born-again virgin at Bible Camp.”

“You mean to tell me that my own girlfriend’s messing around with my bestfriend?”

“At least Dylan can last more than five seconds.”

“I’ve had it, Crystal. It’s over.”

“I don’t care.”

“Screw whoever you want,” said Eddy. “But you’ll be sorry when I’m famous.”

“For wearing cat ears while playing violin?”

“You ain’t heard me at Brew Ha Ha.”

“Just leave, Eddy,” said Crystal, picking up the lingerie and throwing it at Eddy. “Take your panties with you.”

“Stick them up your butt,” said Eddy, slamming the door behind him.

But to Eddy’s surprise, Crystal’s dad was already halfway up the stairs, blocking his way to the exit. The beast looked ready to kill.

“Things just got a little out of hand,” said Eddy, knowing he was trapped. “Everything’s gonna be fine.”

“You better apologize to her now cause you sure as hell don’t want to deal with me.”

Without hesitation, Eddy dove through the giant’s legs, nearly busting his teeth on the carpeted stairway. He tried to scamper away, but Mr. Deviney grabbed his foot.

“What’s goin on up there?” said Crystal’s mom.

“Don’t let him get away!”

Eddy put up a fierce wiggle, using enough force to twist himself out of his Velcro shoes. He beat it down the hallway,

only to bounce into Mrs. Deviney as he scrambled for the back door.

"I'm gonna get you, peckerhead!"

Eddy leapfrogged the back porch, praying that no one was chasing him. Even though he knew that he was miles away from home, he ran down dark roads in the cold night, trying to ignore the rustlings in the pines. Stepping over a crushed turtle, he hoped to make it back to Funderburke Way before Josie caught up with him.

CHAPTER 44

Though it took him thirty minutes to get home, Eddy made it back to the trailer without a hitch. But Josie seemed a bit suspicious about his sudden appearance.

"Her parents gave me a ride back."

"I didn't hear no car."

"They dropped me off at the end of the driveway," said Eddy, still shivering from the cold. "Honest!"

"You look like you done seen a ghost."

"I just need some sleep."

"You ain't drunk, is you?"

"Heck no! Smell my breath."

"Just give your momma a kiss and hit the hay," said Josie. "You better be in good shape for church tomorrow."

Eddy realized that he'd have to confront Dylan in just a matter of hours. With all his adrenaline pumping, he was determined not to back down.

In fact, Eddy didn't need Mountain Dew and Sudafed to get him going the next morning, as the thought of facing Dylan was making his heart spaz. When it came time to head over to Bunkum Creek Church, Eddy was ready. Throughout service, he looked back towards the Spurlock pew – trying to get a good read on his enemy – but the two never made eye contact.

Probably avoiding me, Eddy thought, figuring that Crystal must have warned him.

Eddy found it impossible to listen to the sermon, even when the preacher started talking about some reality show with drug addicts getting help from nymphomaniac nurses, a program that Preacher Manus claimed was produced by the devil himself.

"Satan's gonna reach out of the TV set and grab your children's souls," said the preacher. "Gonna squeeze 'em like a grapefruit!"

Despite the entertainment, Eddy couldn't shake the thought of Dylan putting the moves on his former girlfriend, especially when she gave it up for the first time. It sickened him to know that his bestfriend was always capable of betrayal, even after he fell in love with Crystal.

"I've gotta pee," said Eddy to his mother, whose stockings crackled as she let her son by.

As they commenced the closing hymn, Eddy was already out in the vestibule, trying to figure out the best place to tackle Dylan. But even if he didn't consider himself to be much of a Christian these days, he still couldn't bring himself

to start a fight inside the church. He decided to wait for him outside.

Eddy took his position directly in front of the heavy doors. After staring awhile at a stained glass portrait of a lamb, Eddy dug his dress shoes deep into the faded Astroturf, kicking up chunks of dusty blue.

As people filed out of the sanctuary, Eddy knew that he had to confront Dylan before his mother got out there. When he spotted the gray head of Randy Crummey – a man who always sat alone behind the Spurlock pew – Eddy knew that he had to prepare to battle.

"What's up, Mister Ed?" said Dylan, coming out to smack his hand. "Still grounded?"

"Don't give me that crap."

"What the heck you talkin about?"

"Crystal done told me about you and her. I heard everything."

"What'd she tell you?"

"That y'all been messing around."

"You gonna trust that crazy bitch or me?"

"Why should I believe you?"

"Cause I'm tellin you I ain't never touched the girl," said Dylan. "She's skanky if you ask me."

Without hesitating, Eddy tried to sock Dylan in the face, but his opponent was too quick. They soon locked arms, as Eddy tried to land as many blows as possible. He planted his head into Dylan's stomach, pinning him against a brick column.

"What's goin on here?" said the preacher, running over to break things up.

But as soon as Eddy realized who it was, he backed away from Dylan, leaving a gap just wide enough for Preacher Manus to fall through.

"Preacher!" screamed Eddy, as he ran down the stairs, trying to stop the rolling tub of lard.

Unfortunately, it was too late.

By the time Eddy made it down to help, Preacher Manus couldn't even get off the concrete.

"Somebody call an ambulance!" shouted Eddy.

It didn't take long for Josie Funderburke to huff it down the stairs, looking hellbent on protecting her mentor.

"Are you OK, Preacher Manus?"

"I'll be fine. Probably just broke a thing or two."

"What happened?"

"I think you best ask your son."

Josie shot Eddy a look that made him think about running away as fast as he could. But he knew there was no escape this time.

"Me and Dylan got in a fight and the preacher tried to stop it."

"In front of the entire community? Whatchu think people are gonna say now?"

Eddy wanted to say something back, but he knew that nothing would ease the situation. Preacher Manus had barely moved, still unable to get off the ground.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

"I'm sorry, mom."

"Don't apologize to me. Tell that to Preacher Manus and your buddy."

"I'll tell the preacher I'm sorry, but there ain't no way I'm gonna say that to Dylan."

"What's goin on with you two?" said Josie.

"It's somethin you can't understand."

"Well I'm gonna try."

After others helped the preacher to his feet, Josie grabbed her son and marched him straight to the Grand Cherokee.

"You better tell me what happened or I'm gonna ground you so fast your head'll snap off."

"Just ground me," said Eddy, realizing he didn't want to see anyone outside of the house anyway. "It's easier."

"Soon as we get home, you ain't goin out till next year," said Josie. "If that's how you want it, that's how it's gonna be."

Back at the trailer, Eddy shut himself inside his bedroom, unwilling to venture outside. Having been betrayed by both Crystal and Dylan, he felt his life was nearly over. Facing the crowd at Robert F. Williams High in a few weeks seemed like an impossible task. And continuing to live at home with his mother – attending worship service at Bunkum Creek every Sunday – felt like a cross he could no longer bear.

He thought about calling Gabe, feeling like his brother might be able to understand. But the last thing he wanted to admit is that he got fucked over by his girlfriend, not to mention receiving a near ass-whooping by the guy who screwed her. It didn't help that Myrtle Beach was as far away as Mongolia, considering that Eddy didn't have a car. And the idea of making it on his own – with no grass to mow in winter – seemed more ridiculous every time he thought about it.

Even though he knew he should eat, he didn't have an appetite. After lying in bed all Sunday – even after Josie had gone off to Southern Pride Rest Home – he felt there was only one solution. Eddy took out a Stanley blade that he kept

in the nightstand, just in case someone tried to break into the trailer.

He picked at his wrist in tiny swift strokes. It didn't take long for blood to bubble to the surface, forming tiny beads that swelled into one another. Soon there were red streams dripping down his forearm, tickling his skin.

Feeling faint at the sight of blood, he quickly wrapped his wrist in a bedsheet, hoping that it would absorb the gore. Dropping the Stanley blade onto the floor, he stared at the ceiling tiles, occasionally checking to make sure the blood had stopped. Once everything seemed under control, Eddy quickly fell asleep.

Despite the long rest, he didn't feel so hot the next day. Luckily, his wrist cleaned up well enough to fool Josie, though she did wonder why he tossed his bedsheets into the garbage. Rather than tell the truth, Eddy figured it was easier to say that he had a bad case of diarrhea.

"Didn't it soak through the mattress?"

"Nah, the sheets just ate it up."

"Whatever," said Josie, as she walked out the door. "I don't even care no more."

Eddy tried everything to cheer himself up, but not even a bucket of Neapolitan ice cream did the trick. He spent most of his time in darkness, wishing that he could instantly turn eighteen and leave everything behind. Becoming a violin sensation no longer seemed like a goal worth pursuing, figuring it would be easier to mow grass for the rest of his life, especially if he lived someplace where yards flourished all year long.

CHAPTER 45

The phone wouldn't stop ringing. At first, Eddy thought it might be a desperate call from Professor Sneed. Because Josie had a habit of wearing earplugs to bed, he knew that she probably didn't hear it. After the twelfth ring, Eddy figured he'd better answer it.

"This Eddy?"

"Yep."

"I hate to tell you this," said the stranger. "Will shot himself."

"He did what?"

"Your friend's done passed on. We know you were close."

Eddy held the phone in silence.

"It was an accident or something," he continued. "Took place behind the house, back in the woods. We're still trying to figure it out."

After Eddy ended the call, he immediately thought of Dylan. Even though he knew it was wrong, he couldn't help but feel pleased that his former bestfriend – someone who had recently brought so much pain into his life – now had to deal with a death in the family. Walking back to bed, he wouldn't allow himself to identify the departed with someone who had once been his closest companion.

While lying there, he couldn't shake it off. He figured he needed to at least let his mother know.

He walked into her bedroom and turned on the lights. With a loud clap, he finally snapped her out of sleep.

"What in blazes?" said Josie, removing her earplugs.

"Got a call from a cop or somethin," said Eddy.

"What?"

"Man said Will shot himself."

"You sure?"

"That's all he said," mumbled Eddy, scraping his foot against the carpet like a lazy bull. "I'm going back to bed."

Soon after Eddy flopped down on the mattress, there was a knock on his door.

"We should head over there," said Josie.

"Dylan might beat me up."

"I don't know what happened between you two, but I'm sure he could use a friend right now."

"We ain't friends no more," said Eddy. "He done got with Crystal."

"How you know?"

"She told me."

"Well this is bigger than that."

"I can't face all them people after what happened at church."

"If nothin else, you better do it for Will."

While putting on his clothes, Eddy thought about saying something to upset his mom, hoping that it would get him out of having to face Dylan. After all, she was the one that broke up his friendship with Will so many years ago. But deep down, Eddy had a curiosity that needed to be cured, as he couldn't think of anything else bigger ever happening in Bunkum Creek.

Eddy didn't say a word as they approached the Spurlock's driveway. Josie pulled the Grand Cherokee around back, steering clear of dozens of cars parked in clusters. With the curtains pulled back, the windows revealed faces that Eddy knew from church. He figured everyone else must be family.

Dylan, however, was nowhere in sight.

Even before Eddy got out of the SUV, he felt a bit guilty for wishing so much ill onto Dylan. Looking up at the fort where they used to play, he began to experience something more acute than the hurt that had accumulated over the past few days. Losing trust in Crystal and Dylan – something that might one day be regained – was nothing compared to the certainty of death.

By the time he got inside the house, Eddy felt tears coming down his nose, dripping off his nostrils. Shunning stares from church elders, he stumbled across the floor with his head down, a bit hunched over. He felt as if he were losing his breath, afraid that his presence would make everyone more upset. But the congregation laid hands on his shoulders as he walked into the living room.

Dylan was standing in the corner.

"Don't rush over there," said Josie.

Eddy didn't pay no mind. When Dylan saw him, he darted across the room. The hatred Eddy felt seemed useless in the presence of such great suffering – Dylan's face contorted like a clown, soaking Eddy's shoulder with tears.

Holding onto Eddy, Dylan leading them out the front door. They stood alone in the dark beneath his bedroom window.

"What happened?" said Eddy.

"I don't know," said Dylan, still weeping. "I got back around 6. We all had dinner but Will hadn't come around. We figured he was out with Chief or something. Then we heard his dog barking out in the woods."

"Uh huh."

"So me and dad got flashlights and walked out there," he said, giving into sobs. "I told him not to look, but he wouldn't listen."

Eddy laid his hands on Dylan's shoulders.

"His head was just pieces staring back at me."

They held one another desperately, as if trying to keep one another from falling. The weeping was so fierce that each word – whenever they could speak – came out like a shout.

"I'm sorry," Dylan screamed at the ground.

As flashes of Crystal crossed his mind, Eddy no longer knew what to say.

CHAPTER 46

The following day, Eddy gave the Bunkum Creek cemetery a once over to prepare for Will's burial. The grass hadn't grown much since the fall, but there were weeds to be trimmed. He decided to mow the entire grounds, figuring that his old friend deserved nothing less. Plus, he didn't mind putting in a few more hours, knowing it'd score him extra cash.

Passing a busted tombstone, Eddy wondered if Will had actually killed himself, especially since he supposedly didn't leave a note. *Maybe it's lost somewhere in his room*, he thought, remembering all the clutter – greasy Hardee's bags, sweat-stained t-shirts, crumpled cans of Sun Drop. He wanted to search the closed-off bedroom himself, but felt it would be wrong to volunteer. After all, he figured that the Spurlocks –

along with the Bunkum Creek community – found it necessary to rule his death an accident, so that Will would have a better shot at Heaven.

He was so clumsy, Eddy thought, remembering the time in elementary school when Will crashed into him on the playground, giving the violin virtuoso a black eye. Then there was the mishap with the water gun long ago, along with the day when Will set the woods on fire. His old friend certainly made mistakes, but Eddy thought it was a bit hasty to believe that he accidentally set off a shotgun pointed at his head.

When Eddy got home from mowing, Gabe hadn't made it back home from Myrtle Beach. Earlier in the day, Eddy overheard Josie talking to him on the phone, saying that it'd be nice for him to take off work to look after his brother.

"Ain't no tellin what Eddy might do," she whispered.

Pulling up in the driveway, he noticed that Josie had gone off to work. He left his grass-stained pants outside and headed for the shower. Not too long after he dried off, he heard Gabe's Camaro pull up to the trailer. Even though he knew that he'd come off as a wuss, Eddy couldn't help but run out to hug his older brother.

The pair spent the rest of the day driving around Fecalton, making a stop at the mall to check out girls. Eddy just hoped they wouldn't run into Crystal, yet alone any of the Deviney clan. As the Funderburke brothers walked past the food court, Gabe opened up about his life down in Myrtle Beach. He'd never mentioned that things didn't quite work out the way he planned. The only way he could keep his head afloat was to get a part-time job at Wings, crossing his fingers that it would sustain him through winter.

"It's still worth it," said Gabe. "You get laid just snapping your finger. Them beach girls don't give a fuck!"

"That sounds about right," said Eddy.

"All kinds of keg parties, free liquor, all that shit. It's the good life."

After Gabe had his say, Eddy began recounting all the events of late. Gabe stopped his younger brother when he got to talking about Will's death, perhaps because he was afraid he'd have to deal with a public breakdown. But he allowed Eddy to sing his song about Crystal, and Gabe didn't hold back his assessment of the situation.

"No matter what happened, she cheated," Gabe said. "Don't forget that."

"But what about Dylan?"

"You can't go there," said Gabe. "You gotta stick with your boy."

Eddy pressed Gabe on what he should do about Crystal. He wanted someone to talk to him like a therapist on daytime TV.

"Don't go back to her," said Gabe. "If she did it once, she'll do it again."

"I'm not saying I will," said Eddy, flinging his arms. "It just pisses me off every time I think about her with someone else."

"That's love for ya. But you'll get someone else and all this won't matter."

"There's only one Crystal."

"There's thousands of them," said Gabe. "Shit, just go to college. You'll have to beat them off with a stick."

"How'm I even gonna get there?"

"Your violin, Mozart."

"My teacher's done told me I ain't got no chance at Julliard."

"That ain't the only school out there, you know."

"I'm tellin you that Julliard's the only school."

"Wanna bet?" said Gabe. "I bet you could even study fiddle at Piedmont College."

"Even if I could, they ain't gonna teach me showtunes," said Eddy. "I wanna get famous."

"But didn't you want to play that classical stuff?"

Gabe's question shot straight through Eddy. Ever since Will died, he'd tried to reassess what he wanted out of life. And as much as Eddy wanted to make women faint whenever he appeared on stage in Branson, he knew deep down that there was only one thing that would make him satisfied.

"But there ain't no future in Bach."

"Says who?"

"My teacher," said Eddy. "He even made it to Julliard, but he's nothin but a loser now."

"That don't have to be you," said Gabe. "You better than him. Better than anyone."

"But there's eight-year-olds in Japan who can whoop my ass."

"Shit," said Gabe. "One day you'll end up at Carnegie Hall and I'll be right there on the front row. Who'll be laughing then?"

"But what if I don't make it?"

"Just keep practicing," said Gabe. "You're gonna make it to a good school and everything's gonna work out."

"How you know?"

"Cause I'm your brother."

CHAPTER 47

After the funeral, Eddy was once again confined to his bedroom, serving his second sentence. But this time, it didn't feel like punishment. He dusted off his book of Bach *Partitas* and played them incessantly. Even breaking for *Tetris* seemed like an unnecessary distraction.

Sometimes he wouldn't take time to eat at the dinner table, cracking open another bottle of generic Sudafed to curb his appetite. Even though Josie didn't seem to like it, she let him have his way, dropping a tray of food in front of his door whenever she made dinner at home. Eddy figured she'd told all this and more to Preacher Manus, who was still recovering from the tumble he took outside Bunkum Creek Church.

But despite it all, Josie did seem impressed with his newfound dedication to classical music, even though Eddy refused to take lessons with Donald anymore.

"He was just holdin me back," said Eddy.

"But there's always Southern Park Music School," said Josie. "I'll do anything it takes to get you in there, even if it means getting back with Stu Sneed."

"Don't worry, momma. I'll do it my way."

Eddy continued to play relentlessly throughout the remainder of his Christmas break, becoming more and more determined to make it as a classical musician. One day when his mother was at work, he even took his *Phantom* cape and mask – along with all his Andrew Lloyd Webber music – and burned it inside a rusted refrigerator out in the backyard.

One day, Josie surprised him by slipping a large envelope underneath his door. Eddy had never seen something so large addressed to him.

"You might want to take a look at this," said Josie, her voice tickled with excitement.

Eddy looked at the return address, some place he'd never heard of in Winston-Salem: North Carolina School of the Arts.

"What is this?"

"Just open it, son. You won't believe it."

At first, Eddy was a bit upset that his mother had already looked inside, as the envelope was clearly addressed to Mr. Eddy Funderburke. Taking out the letter, he was impressed by the shiny letterhead at the top, gripping the official seal with his thumb. Josie let herself inside her son's bedroom.

"I don't get it," said Eddy.

"It's a scholarship to attend their high school," said Josie. "A free ride, no questions asked."

"I'm already going to Robert F. Williams High for free."

"But you'll be livin with musicians your age. You ain't even gonna have to worry about cookin your own meals."

"So?"

"They got some of the best teachers in the country," said Josie, taking the glossy brochure from Eddy's hands. "Read right here."

"All I need is time. I don't need nobody teachin me."

"But you'll get to take music all day long. Ain't like regular high school."

"Why don't you go?"

"I would have if I'd had this opportunity back then."

"How'd they find out about me anyways?"

"Sent in the application right after the talent show. Professor Sneed thought it'd be a good idea, especially since you were talkin about how much you hated showtunes. We didn't say nothin cause we didn't want to get your hopes up."

"Mr. Sneed was probably just tryin to get me out of the house so y'all could have the trailer all to yourself."

"That ain't true."

"What were you up to then?"

"Listen to me, Eddy. You always talk about how you want to be a big star in classical music. This is your chance. Says right here they've had people go on to Julliard. Some even played Carnegie Hall!"

"I don't believe it."

"It's all right here."

"Well why'd they take me when there's all of China to pick from?"

"It's real, little man. Call them up if you think it ain't."

"Get me the phone."

After Josie came back with the cordless, Eddy dialed the number on the letter. It didn't take long for him to get ahold of someone from admissions.

"I got this letter sayin I'm accepted."

"Yes?" said the bubbly lady on the other end.

"Is it right?"

"I imagine it must be," said the admissions officer. "May I have your name to look up on the system?"

"Eddy Funderburke," he said. "With an 'e.'"

The maestro listened to the sound of his own breathing as he heard the stranger typing something into a keyboard.

"Says right here that we sent out a letter five days ago."

"You really want me to come to your school?"

"But of course! We wouldn't dare miss out on the child of Kitty Lorraine."

Eddy was stunned by the stranger's words, as he'd thought he got in through his own merits.

"Thank you," said Eddy, a bit dejected.

"We eagerly await your decision. Ta ta!"

As he slammed the phone onto his bed, Eddy looked at his mother with disgust.

"You told them you were Kitty Lorraine?"

"Thought it'd help you," said Josie. "It ain't like they just let anyone through the door."

"So you're sayin I wouldn't got in by myself?"

"That's ain't right at all," said Josie, reaching over to hug her son. "I sent them some of them cassette tapes you used to make. That's the only reason they want to let you in. They

ain't gonna let some no talent hillbilly in there just cause their parents used to be bluegrass stars."

"You just want me to do this cause you didn't have a chance," said Eddy, trying to think of every reason why he shouldn't take this opportunity.

"Listen, son. The last thing I want is to be livin here all alone while you're away in some fancy dorm, probably meetin all kinds of cute girls. But this is the best thing for you."

"Whatever."

"Promise me you'll think it over."

Eddy nodded his head, as he put his arms around his mother. He'd never felt his heart pound so hard.

CHAPTER 48

Whenever Eddy wasn't practicing, he was looking over the admissions packet from North Carolina School of the Arts. The letter made it clear that he didn't have a lot of time to think things over, as they wanted a final decision in a few days.

The more he read about it, the more he wanted to attend. But Eddy was afraid that he wouldn't be as good as his fellow students. Whenever he talked it out with Josie, she reminded him that he auditioned just like everyone else. Regardless, he couldn't stop thinking that his mother's influence might have played the biggest role. It didn't help that he was scared of living with other students his age, especially people from

other parts of the world, who'd probably experienced a lot more than some backwoods boy from Roughedge County.

Sometimes he figured it'd be better just working on a cruise ship, as his violin teacher once suggested. He knew it'd give him a chance to see the world without joining the Army. But as much as he hated to admit it, the thought of going as far away as the Caribbean frightened him too.

"Maybe I'll just play classical music at Brew Ha Ha until I get discovered," said Eddy to his empty room.

As the deadline approached, he shut his ears whenever Josie tried to convince him to attend North Carolina School of the Arts. But something didn't feel right about passing up this opportunity.

One day, the question got to gnawing on him so bad that he couldn't concentrate on violin practice. Even a quick masturbation session in the shower couldn't kick it.

"I'm headin out on my bike," said Eddy, wearing the warmest clothes he had.

"Where you goin?"

"Just gotta ride around a bit. Won't be gone too long."

"You better not," said Josie. "I've got somethin for you when you get back."

"What?"

"Can't show you now," said Josie, her voice trembling a bit.

"Why not?"

"Cause it takes time to get ready."

"I can wait."

"Get your butt out of here, but don't be gone too long," said Josie.

"Ain't gonna clean up my bedroom, are you?"

"Hardly," said Josie. "Don't you worry about nothin."

Eddy didn't know where he was heading, steering his bike aimlessly down country roads. But as he peddled, his mind drifted to the spot in the woods where Will shot himself. Ever since that night at Dylan's, he'd wanted to check it out, but he'd been too preoccupied with the violin. Finding the spot wouldn't be a problem, as he knew it took place just off the trail.

Instead of biking onto the Spurlock property, he took a dirt road that bordered the woods. After ditching his bike, he jumped a barbed-wire fence and headed towards the beaten path. He use the Spurlock house as a reference point, its blue siding all too clear through the trees.

Deep into the woods, Eddy saw a fallen oak wrapped with yellow tape. He figured it must be the site, as it wasn't far off from the trail. He thought about turning around, but something drove him to keep walking.

When he approached the tape, he noticed a big stain on the ground, a dark patch of leaves about as round as a basketball. Didn't take him long to figure out that Will's head had rested there. But now the leaves looked a little charred, as if a flame had whirled atop them, never quite touching the earth.

Eddy reached down and grabbed one of the leaves, thinking it'd make a good souvenir. But when he pulled on one, maggots came crawling from the ground, nearly touching his fingers. Eddy screamed and fell backwards, knocking his head against the oak tree. After collecting himself for a moment, he bolted up from the ground and wiped off both his hands, smearing bits of dirt onto his jeans.

Realizing that someone might have heard him, he started running through the woods, hoping to make it to his bike before he got caught. He wondered if trespassing a crime scene could land him in jail, but he was even more afraid of facing Dylan, trying to explain what he'd been doing at the site.

Eddy jumped over the fence and peddled away, making it back onto the road without being seen. He went as fast as he could until he figured he was free, gliding down hills around the turkeyhouses. Whenever images of maggots popped up, he tried to replace them with visions of lingerie-clad models from the Victoria's Secret catalog.

Pulling into his driveway, he stopped and surveyed all the wreckage that stained his front yard. Staring at the debris, he couldn't stop thinking about North Carolina School of the Arts. As much as he hated to admit it, he was too scared to go. He'd have to leave everything he'd ever known.

CHAPTER 49

By the time Eddy got inside the trailer, he'd forgotten about Josie's surprise. She was nowhere in sight when he opened up the backdoor. He tried to remember if he saw the Grand Cherokee in the driveway.

"Mom?"

"I'm back here, son."

Eddy couldn't believe that she was in his bedroom. As he stomped down the hallway, he realized he shouldn't have trusted her, knowing that she had probably ransacked everything in his closet once again.

It didn't ease his fears to find the door shut.

"Don't tell me you've been goin through my stuff."

"Just come in," said Josie. "Everything's gonna be alright."

When Eddy jerked open the door, he couldn't believe what he saw. There had to be at least three-dozen tea candles lit up everywhere. The air was drenched with perfume. And sprawled out atop his Spongebob Squarepants comforter was none other than Josie Funderburke, wearing nothing but a bra and black pantyhose.

"I know this is what you always wanted," she said, trying out her sexiest voice. "Take a nap with me, son."

Eddy eased over towards the bed, unable to take his eyes off the mounds of flesh spread across his sheets. The pantyhose made her crotch look black as a crow.

"I read that journal," said Josie.

"You ain't mad?"

"Hardly," she moaned, creaking out a chuckle. "No one's ever thought about me the way you do."

"It ain't like that."

"Remember this?" said Josie, spreading her legs.

"I don't know."

"Come back, Eddy Funderburke."

As Josie waved her airbrushed nails across her crotch, Eddy felt his desire explode. He knew that it was wrong, but he couldn't turn away. Right before him was the woman he always wanted, someone who would be with him forever. He slid down his pants and BVDs, producing a dick so stiff that it nearly curved up to his belly.

"What are you doing?" said Josie, as her son crawled onto the sheets.

"I've always wanted this again."

As Eddy slid his face closer to her crotch, Josie grabbed him by the ears and held him at bay.

"You weren't supposed to jump for it," said Josie, trying to get away from her son.

"What's wrong?"

"You really were going to touch me, weren't you?"

It was as if Eddy woke up from years of hibernation, finding himself naked while the universe looked down upon him, pointing and laughing. He put on his pants as quickly as he could, nearly slicing his pecker with the zipper.

"I can't believe it!" said Josie, wrapping the comforter around her naked body. "I thought you'd be disgusted to see the real thing."

"I was just doing what you told me to do," said Eddy.

"Preacher Manus said everything would be different."

"What?"

"After I told him about the journal, he thought your lusting after me was the only thing keeping you from School of the Arts."

"So the preacher told you to get naked?"

"He said it's exposure therapy. Told me if I showed you what you thought you wanted, you'd go running away kicking and screaming."

"I can't believe this," said Eddy, as his boner shrunk. "He knows about everything?"

"He's a man of God, why wouldn't he?"

"Why couldn't y'all just pray for me?"

"We did," said Josie. "God told us this was the right thing to do."

"It ain't even fair," said Eddy. "I wrote that stuff a long time ago."

“Whatchu mean?”

“They were all just thoughts I had. None of it’s true,” said Eddy, wondering if he was lying.

“So why’d you start crawling towards me?”

“Cause I’m a man,” said Eddy. “I can’t help it.”

“Well, the Lord works in mysterious ways. Maybe you’ll decide to go to the School of the Arts after all.”

“I just want to live by myself, play Bach at Brew Ha Ha, and get discovered. But until then, I know I ain’t got no place to go except this trailer, so we might as well get used to it.”

“Promise me that you’ll think about it some more.”

“My mind’s done made up. You call them and say I ain’t comin.”

“Ain’t gonna do it, son. It’s your responsibility.”

“You sent the application, not me!”

Without another word, Josie walked out of Eddy’s bedroom and shut the door.

“I hope this means I ain’t grounded no more.”

CHAPTER 50

During the final few days of winter break, Eddy continued to avoid his mother as much as possible, locking himself away whenever she wasn't off at Southern Pride Rest Home. In the best way he knew how, Eddy tried to establish a bit of normalcy, losing himself in strains of Bach and Mozart until it was time to go to bed. To his relief, Josie stopped coming in to give him a goodnight kiss.

She even stopped talking about North Carolina School of the Arts, but Eddy figured it wasn't far from her mind, as he couldn't stop thinking about it either, despite his resolution not to go.

When it was time to return to Robert F. Williams High, he needed to give his final decision. That morning, he went out

into the kitchen and microwaved his own pancakes, hoping that he could make it to the bus without Josie pressuring him to accept the school's offer. After all, he already had enough to worry about. For one thing, he had to figure out a new place to eat lunch, as Crystal and Dylan were the last people he wanted to see. Rather than packing some PB&J, he decided he would buy something in the cafeteria, hoping that the popular kids might finally give him a chance.

Just as he bit into his pancakes, Josie opened her mouth.

"So what's it gonna be, son?"

"You already know."

"You sure you want to pass this up?"

"Do we have to keep on talkin about it?"

"Guess not," said Josie. "I reckon you feel like you're doin what's best for you. Preacher says you're a young adult now anyway, so I guess you should do what your heart tells you."

"You still getting advice from that freak?"

"Don't question a man of God," said Josie. "That's somethin I hoped you'd learn by now."

"Whatever," said Eddy, returning back to his pancakes.

"I'll give them a call today if you want."

"You'll probably tell them I'm goin."

"I wouldn't do such a thing," said Josie, lighting up a Salem. "You were right about the whole thing. I sent in that application, so I should do the calling."

"Call them now for all I care," said Eddy, looking up at the Precious Moments clock on top of the refrigerator.

"I will just as soon as I can."

"Can't miss the bus," said Eddy, laying his dishes in the sink and grabbing his bookbag.

Neither Josie nor Eddy said goodbye.

His first day back at school wasn't so exciting. Everyone was huddled together in the frigid hallways, trying to stay warm as they chatted with friends. Eddy decided to report straight to homeroom, hoping he wouldn't bump into Crystal or Dylan along the way.

Throughout the morning, he felt a bit detached. Even though he didn't believe in souls so much these days, he wondered if he had lost his along the way, as everything around him seemed as useless as French and Algebra II. After he'd gone all morning without speaking, he started to realize that there was no one he truly wanted to talk to. It bothered him that Will had passed on, thinking he was probably the only person in Roughedge County who could understand.

On the way to the cafeteria, he walked by the building where he used to have lunch. As expected, Crystal and Kaitlin were there in the hallway, along with Dylan. He looked over but walked away, hoping they wouldn't see him. Roaming past the Pepsi machine, he wondered if Robo Rob would be the first to replace him at lunch.

Eddy found it hard to face the cafeteria, its large windows facing the hallway. He stood outside of it, mesmerized by everyone's exaggerated gestures, unable to deal with the relentless noise that filled the halls.

He took a seat on a bench, hoping that no one would join him. As he continued to look at the crowd, he became disgusted by their happiness. Everyone seemed too carefree, unwilling to consider anything greater than themselves.

Bouncing his heel against the floor, he looked outside, wondering how it would feel just to walk away, to keep going no matter what people told him. He got up from the bench

and pressed his cheeks against cold glass. Something in the sensation awakened him to the white fire in his brain, telling him to leave Roughedge County forever.

As he ran towards the payphone, Eddy fished some coins out of his pocket. Without hesitating, he dialed the number that his mother made him memorize so many years ago. He tapped his knuckles against the wall as he waited for her to pick up, afraid that it was too late.

"Mom?"

"Is everything alright?"

"Did you call them?"

"Not yet."

"I wanna go," said Eddy, feeling cold fire spreading through his body.

"Are you sure about this?"

"More than anything in my life."

"This better be for real," said Josie. "We can't be givin them the run around."

"It's true! I finally listened to my heart."

As Eddy held the phone, he heard his mother weeping.

"I prayed so hard that this day would come," said Josie. "You don't know how much I prayed."

"Everything's gonna be fine."

"It's all I ever wanted for you, son. Take this thing and run with it. You ain't gonna disappoint me."

After Josie promised to call North Carolina School of the Arts, Eddy hung up the phone and walked by the cafeteria, no longer concerned about out the noise. As he opened the door to the outside, he felt like shouting something to the world, but he didn't know what to say. He thought back to Gabe's graduation, wishing he could pull off something as grandiose

as his older brother. Instead, he walked back into Robert F. Williams High and smiled at everyone who passed, knowing it wouldn't be long until he was far, far away.

January 21

There were these brothers I ain't thought about in a while. One was all into buildings but we never talked much since he was a couple years older. Always fiddling with them Legos.

Middle one was about my age. He'd take apart everything, messing with circuit boards and stuff. Dude even took a Phillips screwdriver to the DVD just to get into somethin.

Youngest one ain't all that bright but he'd play around with animals. Really into them yarded cats, the kind that rip rabbits out of the field. Even tamed one when it was a little thang. He'd pet it rough, talking about how he loved it. Always said he could make it talk. Just take it and squeeze the ribs til it yells. Said it was talking to me.

I felt bad for that cat, you know. Really.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Author photo courtesy of Danimal